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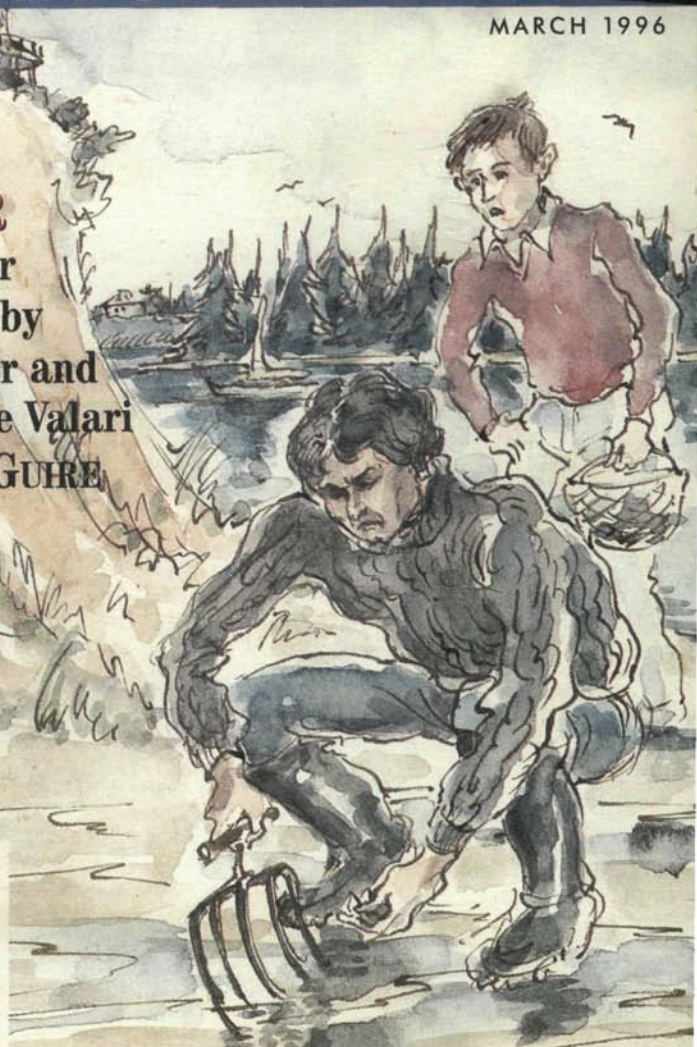
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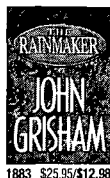
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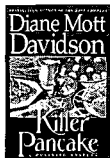
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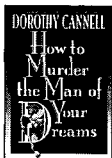
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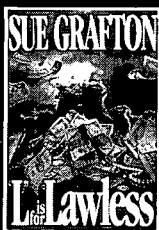
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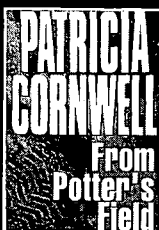
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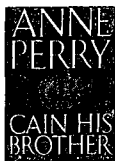
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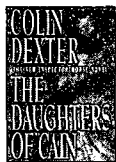
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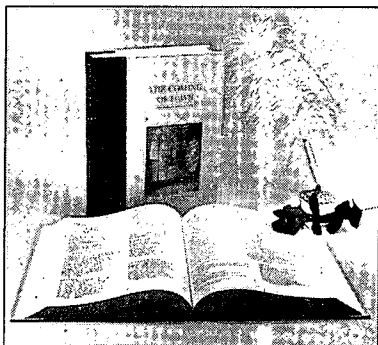
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Poetry Contest

\$24,000 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes to amateur poets in coming months



The Coming of Dawn, featured above, is one of National Library of Poetry's recent deluxe hardbound anthologies.

Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$24,000 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in ONLY ONE original poem, any subject, any style to:

The National Library of Poetry
11419 Cronridge Drive
PO Box 704-6123
Owings Mills, MD 21117

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "Each poem received will be acknowledged, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely. Every poet who enters will receive an evaluation of their artistry.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

In this issue we cover a lot of ground. From the West Coast—Oregon in David Braly's "Popped in the Pot Patch" and Hollywood in the early 1940's in Leslie T. White's "Merchant of Menace"—to the East Coast—Cape Cod—in D. A. McGuire's continuation of the adventures of Herbie Sawyer and Jake Valari in "The Clammer," and across the sea as well, to England, in Maude Miller's "The Last Word." The Midwest is present in Dan Crawford's "Nick and Lizzie," set in Iowa (with a whiff, even, of the brimstonish Down Below), and so is the Deep South, in O. S. Flanagan's new tale of Alma Adams' Atlanta detective agency, "Frankly, My Dear, I Don't Give a Herd of Scarletts." This time, Alma and Callie are on the job at a costume ball; you can no doubt guess the theme!

Also in this issue . . . we are

pleased to present Arthur Porges' sixtieth story for AHMM, "Five Finger Exercise." Mr. Porges' first AHMM story, "Sheep Among Wolves," appeared in the June 1959 issue, which means that he came to us only two and a half years after the magazine's founding. Born in 1915 in Chicago, he studied mathematics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, taught college math for some fifteen years before and after his 1942-1945 army service, and has made "a few minor discoveries in math and one in cryptology." (Something we intend to find out more about, by the way.) In 1957 he stopped teaching to write full time and has published more than two hundred fifty stories, about half and half mysteries and science fiction/fantasy. For many years now he has lived in Pacific Grove, California.

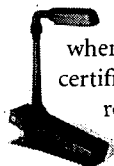
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FICTION

The Last Word


Maude Miller



Illustration by Jason C. Eckhardt

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/96

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Life had been rather uncomplicated before Leona moved in, Edith thought wistfully. Leona with her blue-grey hair and real gold earrings and remarkably unlined skin, seventy-three-year-old woman that she was. Theo said she'd had a facelift while living in America; Theo said they all had facelifts there once they passed fifty. Leona *had* certainly changed since living in California with her American husband for so many years, even Edith admitted to that. She had found a way of using up all the sisterly love and patience that had existed among them in the past; she always had to have the last word.

"Theo, your skin would be as nice as mine if you'd use my special formula facecream on that turkey gobbler neck of yours," Leona said in her reproving voice, used when she was pointing out some particularly galling inadequacy of her sisters'.

Seventy-five-year-old Theo, with her short, softly waving white hair and tallish, amply proportioned figure, did indeed have several folds of loose skin hanging off her neck, but so what?

Leona, she thought with irritation, didn't know everything. She rebelled against her sister by using no youth-restoring remedies at all. "I like my skin the way it is, Leona."

"I don't see how you could," Leona replied doubtfully. "No harm in trying to look your best."

Leona never concentrated long on Theo's appearance, however. Theo never took her excellent advice, and there were the more challenging shortcomings of younger sister Edith to attend to. Edith was a dowdy spinster with straight, iron-colored hair that fell just below her fading chin. A deeply lined face was interrupted by two small, pale grey, frightened looking eyes, a facial mole, and a prominent nose. Leona had tried on numerous occasions to make Edith over so that *someone* might want her, but it was no use. Edith insisted on looking like a wallflower; she'd had the same haircut for thirty years and dressed like one of those bag ladies who push a grocery cart around.

Each time Leona had visited in the past she'd had Edith's hair done, left her with makeup (and lengthy demonstrations on how to use it) and a new wardrobe of smart clothes. They were Leona's own castoffs, but Edith was naturally thin and could fit into most of them. On subsequent visits, however, Edith would always be back to her old self, the clothes mysteriously gone and the makeup relegated to the back of a cluttered drawer.

Leona blamed Theo for that.

She often wondered why she was so unappreciated by her sisters. Didn't they *want* her help? She thought they ought to; they were always in such a muddle. And she herself was a paragon of organization and efficiency. Give it time, she told herself reassuringly. She'd soon have them both straightened out and doing things her way. They'd soon realize she knew best.

But in the meantime she wanted a traveling companion. She didn't think seriously of taking Theo along on the trip she was planning to Morocco. Theo was too troublesome and scarcely listened to her advice. But Edith was still—pliable. And without Theo along, Edith would do what Leona told her to.

Leona had been all over the world (courtesy of two late husbands' generous life insurance policies), and she was itching to take off again. Travel brochures were piling up, but this time she was set on having a warm holiday. Rainy, bone-chilling England was not as she'd remembered it in her childhood. Morocco would remind her of sunny California and her years of tolerable marriages and blissful widowhood.

"Let's go to Morocco, Edith."

"Isn't Morocco a place to visit in the winter?" Theo asked snidely. "It'll be scorching there this time of year."


"Mind your own business, Theo," Leona answered. "Besides, it always feels like winter here. Don't you ever get any sunshine? If I'd known how cold it was going to be, I'd have stayed in California."

More's the pity, Theo thought ruefully. She continued in a brusque voice. "Edith doesn't want to go to Morocco." Theo thought she would rather have unanesthetized dental surgery than suffer a holiday with her know-it-all sister. And poor Edith couldn't speak up for herself.

Leona raised her arched, penciled-in eyebrows at Theo and turned back to Edith, who was seated uncomfortably on the green chintz settee in front of the fireplace. "Of course you want to go with me, don't you, Edith? You need to have some fun."

Edith shrugged her shoulders helplessly before a look of panic crossed her wrinkled face. She'd never had much *fun*, as Leona called it, but the thought of actually getting on an airplane and setting foot on foreign soil was terrifying.

What if the plane crashed or terrorists seized it? Any number of things could go wrong and often did. She'd read the papers, hadn't she? Edith shuddered. She'd never been any farther than Peterbor-



ough, and that with Theo. She only felt safe with Theo at her side. The thought of adventure made her heart flutter with fear.

"I don't think I could go, Leona. I like it better here," she protested weakly, sinking deeper into the soft cushions of the settee, rather wanting to disappear.

Leona ignored her. "Stuff and nonsense. I'll get the tickets at the travel agent's next week." Then she added in a breathy voice, "Oh, it'll be *such* fun!" She smiled gleefully as she clasped her slim hands together, her blue hair shining in the lamplight of the cosy sitting room. She was already formalizing plans to transform Edith's appearance once again, away from Theo's watchful eye. They had to be a handsome pair, after all. Not that Leona wanted a third husband, she was finished with marriage. But possibly a flirtation? She had to be prepared, just in case. Perhaps she'd have another tint put on her own hair, bluer this time. She thought her hair was her best feature, although she did have a girlish figure as well. Lots of self-restraint and careful attention to her diet, she told herself proudly; if Theo and Edith would follow her example, they'd be much better off, any fool could see that.

"Just because she has money doesn't mean she can tell us what to do," Theo said acidly to Edith the next day as they were working on their embroidered tea towels for the annual summer fete at the vicarage.

"It was your idea to have her move in with us," Edith pointed out meekly. She reached for another jam tart.

"In case you hadn't noticed, little sister, we're rather hard up," Theo replied. "Before Leona came, I didn't see how we could afford to live in this house for another six months, what with all the repairs and taxes." She attacked the embroidery on the tea towel with renewed vigor. "I don't see that I had much choice."

"I expect not," Edith answered, eyeing Theo's tattered cardigan and well-worn housedress. Theo shouldered all the responsibilities for them both and had done so for over twenty years since their invalid mother had died and left Edith without a home or a purpose in life.

"Don't you think we'd better hide this tray of tarts before she gets back from the hairdresser's? She'll really be on us if she sees us eating again."

Theo rolled her bright blue eyes. "For pity's sake, I can eat what I want. If I want to be *fat*, I'll be *fat*!"

"No need to bite my head off," Edith answered in a hurt voice.

Since Leona had moved in several months before, the arguments between the sisters had escalated. Edith and Theo had never quarreled before *she* came. Leona was trouble. It was then that Theo decided something had to be done about their meddling sister.

The following week, Leona started in on doing the house over (it needed refurbishing, didn't it?). Edith listened agreeably, but Theo felt a rising irritation. It wasn't enough to do *them* over, the house had to be changed as well. Leona planned to revamp the garden, too.

"I think we should put a row of pansies along the walkway in back. And get rid of that awful gazebo."

At this Theo bristled. "Oh no, we won't. The gazebo was Cecil's favorite place to sit in the evenings." Cecil had passed on twenty years before, but Theo still felt strangely loyal about the house they'd lived in for the thirty-odd years of their contented marriage. They'd had a child, one child only, a boy who'd lived to be ten, then died of viral pneumonia during a relentlessly cold winter. Oddly enough, Cecil had taken it much harder than Theo had. He'd built the gazebo in memory of their son and was, during the remainder of his lifetime, fiercely dedicated to it. She'd told Leona that before, of course, but Leona never paid any attention to her.


"It's dreadful, Theo," Leona persisted. "We'll have it bulldozed and build a new one, a modern one."

"I don't want a new one," Theo said, thrusting her strong chin out for emphasis, the turkey gobbler skin hanging below it. "I want *this* one."

Leona flashed dark, angry eyes at her.

"The gazebo *stays*," Theo said, folding her arms tightly across her broad chest.

Leona could buy some new things for the house if she wanted, Theo thought angrily, but she wasn't to change anything, not without Theo's approval. In an effort to calm her nerves, she reminded herself that they needed Leona's money. After all, that was why she'd come to live with them (from Theo's standpoint, anyway). Theo had known about Leona's sizable pension of over a thousand pounds each month and the large sum in the bank, too. Leona had paid for the new roof, repaired Theo's old car, and hired the painters to repaint the outside of the peeling white Victorian. Having Leona live with them had seemed like an ideal arrangement at the time.



But Theo had forgotten how bossy Leona was. Maybe she'd wanted to forget.

The following week, Theo returned from a full day of shopping in Peterborough to a trio of workmen fitting out the lavatories. Theo had dearly loved her old fashioned baths with the big iron tubs. There was one on the ground floor and another upstairs. She had soaked in them often in the days before central heating.

"Nonsense," Leona said firmly when Theo expressed her dismay. "The tubs are positively ancient, Theo. I can *afford* to have them replaced, you know. It's no good pleading poverty when I can pay for it all."

Theo's head was aching, and her back hurt; a day at the shops as a prelude to this was simply too much.

"I can see it's too late to do anything about it now, Leona. The lavatories will have to be done, since they're already half demolished. But I'm warning you," she said hotly, a purplish color flooding her pale cheeks, "next time you are to consult with me first. It's my house, isn't it?"

The next day at teatime Leona was out. Gone off to London to see her solicitor or something, Edith said vaguely. Theo didn't ask for details; she wasn't speaking to Leona.

It was over scones, marmalade, and a cuppa that Theo first voiced her plans to Edith. They were seated at the scrubbed oak table in the kitchen, looking out the picture window into the garden. The flowers were blooming although the weather was only sporadically warm. Lilies of the valley were nestled in their shaded spot in the garden, the oblong leaves sheltering the white, bell-shaped flowers. Soon the fragrance of the garden would waft through the open leaded windows in the sitting room and hall, sweetening even the soured atmosphere Leona had brought with her. But Theo looked skeptically at the garden and the gazebo, bringing herself back to reality. Leona would change it all. There was no stopping her; in time she'd have the gazebo down and the garden destroyed. Leona always had to have the last word.

Theo couldn't allow it, not any more.

"I'm afraid we're going to have to do something about Leona, Edith. I've been trying to think of some other way, but I don't see how it can be avoided." Theo spoke calmly, as matter-of-factly as if she were considering what to do with the family dog.

Edith looked up from her plate of scones, swallowing hard. She was trying to down as many as she could before Leona got home; a

large chunk of orange marmalade was suspended from the corner of her mouth. "What can't be avoided?" she finally asked, picking up another scone.

Theo raised her napkin to Edith's mouth. "You've got marmalade on your face, dear." She put the napkin down. "We must get rid of Leona."

"But we need her money, don't we? How would we get on without those pension checks?" Edith bit into her third scone nervously. She was thinking of the impending trip to Morocco. The tickets had been secured and her passport sent for, but nothing had eased her fears. In fact, she was more frightened than ever about getting on that airplane with Leona. If Leona moved out, of course, she'd be spared the trial of actually going.

Theo daintily took a sip of tea and dabbed the corners of her mouth. "We're not going to give up the pension checks, Edith."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Theo said coolly, "we're going to do her in. We'll say she's traveling around the world—although no one's likely to ask—and that she'll be away for some time. We'll continue to get her pension checks and there's the bank account in London as well. They're not likely to know her by sight. And I've been practicing her signature."


"You can't be serious," Edith said in alarm. "You're not serious, are you, Theo?"

"Of course I'm serious. You don't think I'd joke about something like that, do you?"

Edith didn't know what to think. All she could think was that she had been momentarily relieved when she'd thought Theo was going to ask Leona to move out, for she'd have been spared the holiday in Morocco, since it wasn't until next month. But she certainly wasn't relieved about this. With shaking hands she poured herself another cup of tea, until it poured over the top of the cup and onto the lace tablecloth. She didn't notice until Theo placed a steady hand on her shaking one. "You're spilling, dear."

Theo cleaned up after her.

When Edith woke up the following morning, she trudged downstairs with a heavy heart. Theo had gone round the bend, she thought with panic. And there was nothing to be done about it. Edith had never taken care of anything herself. Theo did that. Maybe, however, it was just nerves. Many things could be attrib-



uted to nerves, it seemed. She comforted herself briefly with the notion that this was so; Theo had sometimes been afflicted with a nervous condition.

Theo and Leona were sitting at opposite ends of the kitchen table in a morose silence. Leona brightened when she saw Edith heading unsteadily towards them and started an energetic flow of chatter.

"We're all set, dear Edith. We're leaving on Wednesday next."

"But I-I thought," Edith faltered, "we-we weren't leaving until next month. My passport . . . I-I won't be ready next week."

Leona dismissed this triviality with a wave of her hand. "I hurried up your passport; it should be here in a couple of days. And really, why wait? The weather next month will be better here, and now it's miserably chill, so why not escape England now and have our little holiday in the sun sooner rather than later?"

Why not indeed? Edith asked herself unhappily. Well, mainly because she didn't want to go at all and she thought that maybe by next month Leona would be gone. She looked at Theo, but Theo gave her a smug smile as if to say, *I'm doing what's best for both of us, Edith.*

Edith took to her bed for the rest of the day with a headache.

Theo retired to her bedroom early that night, with a book on poisonous plants.

Leona made plans to have the kitchen redone. That big, fat Theo couldn't scare *her*. Leona would do as she liked.

A few days later, on Friday, Theo set to work early in the shadows of the kitchen, making a soup. It was chilly out, and the dark clouds hovered overhead with menace. The impending storm cast an ominous gloom over the shining white house, almost hidden by a rapidly leafing forest of deciduous trees and an occasional spruce. They had no neighbors nearby; living off by themselves had always been deeply appealing to Theo. And now it was crucial that they be alone, away from the interference of well-meaning neighbors. There was their activity in the local church, of course—she and Edith had always taken part in the occasional women's group and had a casual acquaintance with the young vicar—but people seldom came to visit. Edith was dull as nails, and Theo hadn't the patience for many friendships. Friends got on her nerves. Leona, of course, thought she was better than most of the villagers. It would have been beneath her to become too friendly with any of them.

There *were* the workmen to contend with. But only vaguely inter-

ested in completing a job (it was infinitely more interesting to begin one), they had not shown up since Tuesday and had told a spewing Leona that they wouldn't be back for a fortnight, at the *earliest*, they'd added bravely.

Theo had carefully worked through all the details of what she was about to do; further delay could create problems. She felt invincible.

By lunchtime it had started raining, drizzling at first, then rapidly escalating into a downpour. Although it was midday, the inside of the house was dark and the atmosphere funereal. Only the light in the kitchen was switched on.

"I'm making a low-fat soup for you, Leona. Lots of vegetables and no meat at all." Theo stood stirring the soup on the cooker and glanced over her shoulder at Leona, who was scrubbing away at some invisible dirt on the table. "As a peace offering, dear," Theo added in a pleasantly soothing voice.

Leona stopped cleaning and stared at Theo's broad, strong back. She was struck dumb for a moment, an oddity for Leona. "Why, how . . ." she stumbled, "how lovely!" She returned to her work with a satisfied smile. Theo had come around, she told herself smugly. She had known all along that she would.

"I think you'll be quite surprised what a low-fat diet will do for your figure, Theo. And for your health. You could live forever on a healthy regimen like mine."

Theo looked down at the soup she was stirring and the extra smaller pot in back, made especially for Leona. The vase in the corner of the countertop, previously filled with lilies of the valley, was now empty. Not bloody likely that *you'll* live forever, she thought maliciously. She said sweetly, "I should have listened to you long ago. Of course you're right, about the house, too. Those lavatories needed renovation."

Edith looked back and forth from Leona to Theo, confused by the sudden truce. What were they playing at? She watched Theo ladle out the soup as Leona stepped into the w.c. to wash up.

"Why do you have two pots of soup, Theo?" Edith asked suspiciously.

"Because I've poisoned one of them, dear," Theo answered.

"You didn't! Please say you didn't, Theo. I can't believe you could do such a thing."

"But I did. I poisoned it with the lilies of the valley from our very own garden. The garden Leona wants to destroy."

"Then why are you being so nice to her?"

“Because otherwise she won’t eat the soup.”

Edith backed away with a squeak, her frightened grey eyes terror-struck.

“But she’ll notice and won’t eat it.”

“Leona’s not interested in cooking, you know that,” Theo said. “Cooking to her is a piece of unbuttered toast and a tin of pears.”

Leona walked in just then. “Smells lovely! Let’s eat.” She sat down at the table, waiting to be served.

Theo served Edith and Leona both. She couldn’t risk Edith’s shaking hands’ dropping Leona’s soup.

Leona talked feverishly while she ate. It was no surprise that she didn’t notice the soup’s odd taste. She was too busy handing out as much as advice as possible while Theo was still listening to her.

“I don’t know what you were thinking when you bought that settee in the sitting room, Theo. It’s such a ghastly shade of green. Now, my advice would be to get a new one, something carnation pink, perhaps?”

Oh yes, Theo thought disdainfully. Carnation pink would be just the thing to go with Leona’s blue hair. “I’m sure you’re right, Leona,” was all she said.

Leona smiled happily. Edith opened her mouth, without thinking, to tell Leona not to eat her soup. What Theo was doing was all wrong. She had to stop it. Before she could speak, however, Leona said, “We’ll be eating lots of strange food in Morocco, Edith. But it’ll be quite an experience for you. Can you believe it? Less than a week before we’re on that plane!” Edith couldn’t say a word. She was almost ashamed for being such a coward.

Leona finished the bowl of soup. Almost immediately she started having hot flushes, and a headache set in. She complained of violent stomach pains while Edith led her upstairs to bed.


Theo dutifully followed and sat beside her the rest of the day, watching Leona’s face cover itself with red patches just before she started vomiting.

“I need to go to the surgery, Theo. You’re trying to kill me. I can see that,” Leona panted. “You’re not going to get my money, though. I’ve been to see my solicitor. It’s all to go to charity.”

“Don’t upset yourself,” Theo told her. “You’ll be just fine by tomorrow.”

“It was the soup, wasn’t it?” Leona gasped before she collapsed.

Edith peered over Theo’s shoulder at Leona, small and flushed, lying between the fluffy white pillows at the top of the brass bed.



Suddenly Theo regretted what she'd done. Leona deserved many awful things, she told herself, but she didn't really deserve to die. What she actually deserved was to be born again, to be fat, ugly, and poor. But it was too late for recriminations. Leona was dying, and there was no way they could get anyone to help her. The inevitable had to be accepted.

Theo and Edith shut the door behind them and spent a tense, silent evening downstairs in front of the fire, listening to the rain beat against the leaded windows and watching the lightning crackling around the gloomy house.

Theo finally rose, retrieved the shovel from the garage, and contemplated the grim task of burying Leona tomorrow.

By morning the storm had abated. It was muddy out, but there was no time to waste. The task would have to be completed in privacy. Theo opened Leona's door timidly.

But the brass bed was empty.


Theo pulled back the duvet, certain that skinny Leona must be hiding somewhere. She looked in the cupboard, filled to overflowing with Leona's designer clothes. She lumbered anxiously into Edith's bedroom, but it was unoccupied as well. She heard voices downstairs. Gingerly, nervously, Theo started down the stairs. At the bottom she stopped in shock. Leona was chatting amiably with a pale Edith, as if last night was a forgotten nightmare.

Theo held onto the stair rail for support. "Are you feeling better then, Leona?"

"Right as rain," Leona answered blithely. "Edith told me I was ill yesterday, but you know, I can't remember a thing!" She laughed, shook her shoulders helplessly, and started in on the unsightly mole on Edith's cheek and how she'd be much more attractive without it and Leona knew just the doctor to take it off. But they'd have to wait until after Morocco. . . .

Edith blanched.

And so it went. The three sisters spent the remainder of the day in the house because a light rain had set in, keeping it wet outside. Theo was strangely relieved that Leona hadn't died, although she was still left with the dilemma of what to do about her, short of murdering her. They couldn't go on like this. Theo seemed to hear her from a great distance even though Leona was sitting right next to her on the green settee (soon to be shipped off to a jumble sale, no doubt).



"And, Theo, I think we should send you to a diet clinic, to take that weight off once and for all. I'll pay for it, of course." Theo felt her shoulders tighten and her blood pressure soar.

By late afternoon the sky had blackened prematurely as another thunderstorm gained momentum. Theo switched on the porcelain lamps in the sitting room and lit the fire. Edith did embroidery while Theo read a murder mystery. By eight o'clock Leona had retired, exhausted, it seemed, from all that advice giving. After an hour or so, they heard a thump from upstairs.

Theo was unconcerned, but Edith scurried up quickly, into the dark corridor illuminated only by intermittent bolts of lightning. Moments later Edith screamed, and Theo followed her up the mahogany staircase and through the open door of Leona's bedroom. Leona was lying on the wood floor beside her bed, bluish and most certainly dead. Theo checked her pulse; there wasn't one. She determined that Leona must have tried to get out of bed and collapsed. Heart failure perhaps? She wondered guiltily if it was a delayed effect of her insane attempt to poison Leona yesterday, but she promptly dismissed that notion: lilies of the valley were supposed to have an immediate effect.

"We murdered her," Edith said in a small voice, fighting back the tears.

"We didn't murder her," Theo replied sensibly. "She just died on her own. If we'd killed her, it would have happened yesterday. It's just coincidence."

"What are we going to do?"

"We're going to bury her."

"Shouldn't we call the doctor?"


Theo put her hands on her hips, Prussian soldier style. "And what if they find poison in her blood? Who do you think they'll blame for that?"

Edith looked at the floor.

"And what about the pension checks?" Theo continued. "This is perfect, Edith. We didn't actually kill Leona, but we get the benefits all the same. You heard her last night, didn't you? She was going to give all her money to charity. That's why she was visiting her bloody solicitor the other day. To make sure we didn't get any of her money if anything happened to her."

"But we tried to kill her," Edith said tearfully.

"We didn't succeed, dear. Though I must say I'm not sorry she's dead. We need those pension checks, little sister."



Theo buried Leona under the gazebo. She felt surprisingly calm about the whole affair.

Several weeks passed. The trip to Morocco was canceled and the tickets cashed in to pay for the restoration of the lavatories (Leona had prepaid half). Two pension checks came, and Theo had no trouble cashing them. They had done nothing wrong in the end, Theo told herself reassuringly, and life was better than ever. She and Edith were alone again with no one to advise them about their many faults. Leona was safely tucked away underground beneath the gazebo. Cecil wouldn't have liked that, but at least Theo had saved his gazebo, hadn't she? She told Edith that Leona was still with them, of course, she was just in a more suitable place. Where she couldn't have the last word in every conversation.

Things went along swimmingly until one day when Theo and Edith motored to Peterborough for a day of shopping. It was a sunny day in June, and Theo felt blissfully happy. Edith was back to her old self, too. They'd bought a fair amount of goodies to munch on and a new housedress for each of them. When they pulled into the driveway, however, they saw a backhoe in the garden, digging up the gazebo. Leona must have ordered the work done weeks ago, and the workmen, being the procrastinators they traditionally were, had just now gotten around to it.

Theo jumped out of the car to stop them, but it was too late. She heard one workman call out to the other, "Take a look at this, Melvin. Why, it's . . . my god, it is. It's a dead body! We'd better call the police right away."

Leona had had the last word after all.

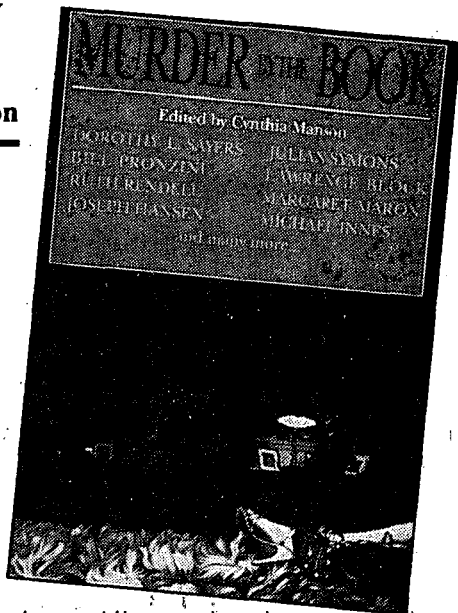
Death Between the Covers

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Edited by Cynthia Manson

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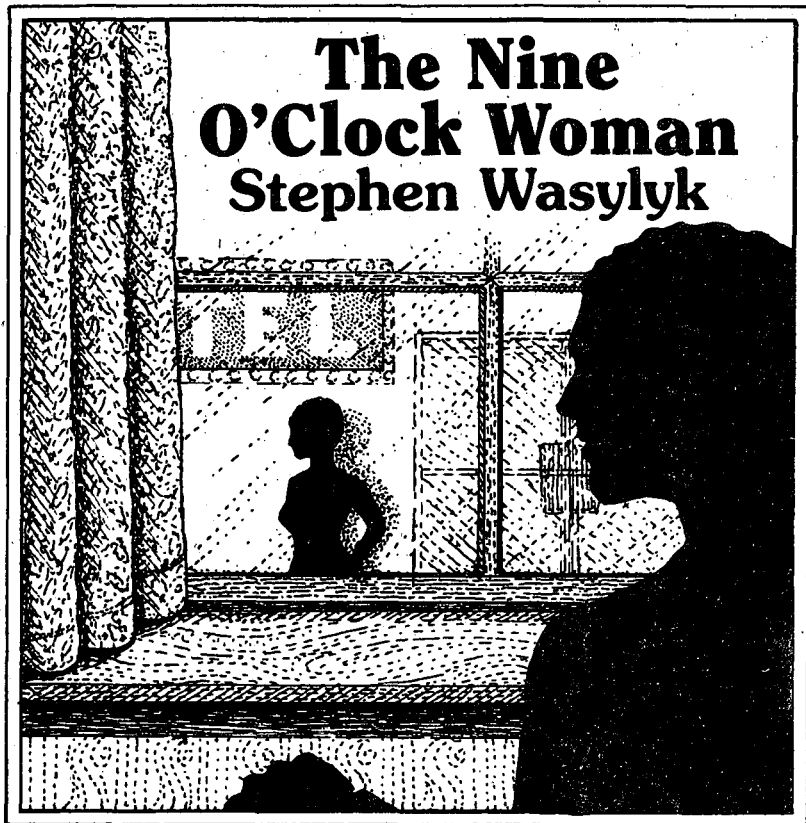


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The Nine O'Clock Woman

Stephen Wasylyk



The articles on police work I'd written over the last year had sprung to life easily, but now the impatiently blinking cursor on the monitor challenged me to begin.

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. It was as clear against the blackness as the meticulously woven images on a story tapestry, yet the right words eluded me.

Perhaps because what is closest to your heart is the most difficult to write about . . . or perhaps because it was no longer important to anyone but me.

My apartment was on the second floor of one of a row of old red brick townhouses near the center of town. As yet, the malls and shopping centers hadn't siphoned away all the evening ac-

tivity from the intersection. The movie house survived on one corner, people clogged their arteries in the fast food shop on another, and travelers, tourists, and locals entered and left the hotel on the third, drawn by one of the area's best dining rooms and bars.

My leg cast and wheelchair would soon be replaced by a brace and walker, which would be replaced by a cane, which wouldn't be replaced. Because a man named Morgan had run a stop sign and crushed my left leg along with the side of my patrol car, I would never again walk without support.

During my immobility, my bay window had become a theater box overlooking a stage where the nightly drama was never scripted, while allowing me to feel I was still part of it all.

One warm summer Friday night, a woman under the marquee of the hotel caught my eye. A graceful walk, like proper speech, must be taught and practiced. She'd learned somewhere. Slowly pacing, seemingly waiting for someone, pausing occasionally to lean against the hotel, one toe tapping; a slowly angering woman whose date was late.

Nothing unusual. The corner was one of the town's popular meeting places.

I reached for my field glasses. Classic dark suit and white blouse were a cut above anything available in the local shops. Tall, long-legged, and slender. Coppery hair full but short. Another of the growing number of young female traveling sales reps, I told myself.

Until she turned.

There is a classic stereotyped face of a prostitute, so heavily made up as to be grotesque, projected first on the stage so that the audience could immediately identify the character being portrayed; art imitating life, but seldom seen today.

Her overdone eye makeup, rouged cheeks, and garish lipstick would have been out of place anywhere. In our town, slow to adopt more tolerant standards, it was bizarre.

I kept the glasses on her.

Close to ten, Richards' car pulled up below, the gold on his cap and shoulders glinting in the light from the street lamp. I didn't turn when he knocked and entered.

He clasped my shoulder. "Welcome back. I see you've caught up to the town's newest attraction. How did the operation in Philadelphia go?"

"I told them if they cut again it'd be to take it off," I said grimly. "Keeping an eye on young Morgan?"

"Bet on it. He violates his probation, he's gone."

I raised the field glasses. "Who's the walker?"

"Her name is Cass Fleming. She showed up on the corner about three weeks ago. This being his sector, it didn't take Hendrix long to notice what everyone has been seeing every Friday night."

A young man crossed from the fast food shop and spoke to her, smiling. She shook her head and turned away. The man retreated across the intersection.

Another tried. Again she shook her head.

When the third approached, she listened, her head cocked slightly, then smiled. They entered his car and drove off.

"Always the same," said Richards. "Starts walking at nine. No telling which man will be lucky. Hendrix talked to a winner. Very nice, very pleasant, he said, but also very remote, as though she wouldn't remember him ten minutes later. Wouldn't go directly to a motel. Had to take her to dinner first, but there was no doubt where they'd end up."

"How much does she charge?"

"Nothing. And she doesn't solicit, which takes it out of our hands. She really does nothing more than many other women do on Friday night—look for a man. The makeup and whatever

game she plays make her different."

"Why the interest if she's breaking no laws? A chief has more important things to do."

"I don't like unknowns. She arrived by bus about four weeks ago, but we ran into a dead end very quickly. No credit cards. No driver's license. Social Security number is valid, but no work history. I have a gut feeling that tracing it back would be a waste of taxpayers' money."

"Mystery woman with a hang-up."

"Something we all have. Yours is living in this second floor apartment instead of using your insurance settlement to buy one of those ranchers on the edge of town where it would be easier to get around."

And be twice as lonely because there would be nothing to see and feel part of. "I like it here. Mrs. Schneider has adopted me."

He moved to the door. "Okay, but anything she can't handle, we can. Incidentally, the lady found a job with a friend of yours. Ruthanne Balaski."

"Not surprising. Ruthanne sees only the best in everyone."

"Well, *this* might jar you a little. She's also your neighbor. Lives in the room at the rear."

The movie patrons dispersed noisily after Clint Eastwood tri-

umphed once again, and the town settled down for the night. At one thirty I heard a car door thud, the woman's footsteps on the stairs, and her door latch click.

If you intend to watch a drama, it helps to know the cast. I called Ruthanne in the morning.

Blonde hair cut without style, a fashion preference for sweat-shirts, jeans, and sneakers. (Shut up, Miles. An antique dealer never knows when she'll be invited into an attic or basement.) A round face, easy smile, wide-set blue eyes, and a bit on the heavy side. (Be realistic, Miles. Thirty pounds less, I'd need police protection from lust-crazed males.)

Her phone voice was low and throaty. (I could make a fortune with one of those 900 numbers, Miles.)

After reaming me out for not calling the moment I came home, she chuckled when I asked about her new employee.

"Well, I'll tell you, Miles, every so often something turns up you're not quite sure of, but you *are* sure you're looking at something very fine. That's her. She said she knew a little about antiques and was looking for a job. Hah. She wouldn't know an Amish plow from a butter churn, but she can flick a finger-

nail against a crystal goblet and tell you who made it and when. You get that way when you grow up surrounded by those things. Ergo—"

She chuckled. "I like that word. Think I'll name my first kid Ergo. Ergo, she grew up in earth orbit while we were slogging through dog doodoo below. Just looking at her makes me feel like a sweaty field hand. I know she goes loopy every Friday night, which is hazardous to your health these days, but she's hurting no one but herself. Otherwise she's as normal as the rest of us, if a bit quieter. I certainly won't fire her. I'd rather keep an eye on her and be around if she needs me."

"With her lifestyle, you'll get your opportunity."

"Even in a wheelchair, you're a wiseass, Miles."

Mrs. Schneider entered with my breakfast tray as I hung up. Her gray hair was always carefully tended and curled, but she'd long ago decided that apple strudel was more important to her than her figure. Her face, plump and round, must have once pleased many men, including the not-long-dead Mr. Schneider, whose demise had been responsible for the creation of the rented rooms.

"You didn't tell me about the new roomer."

"What is there to tell? A nice

young woman, clean and neat and quiet."

"I saw her on the corner—"

"Ah, we have here a Mr. Big Nose, who has nothing better to do than snoop."

"You approve of her behavior?"

Her eyes flashed. "What approve? Many people lie and cheat and steal every day, but let them go to church on Sunday and suddenly they are good people. Let her go out on Friday night, and everyone talks. If she wishes to be bad for a few hours, that is her business. You tell me for which of them St. Peter will open the gates."

I grinned. "I'll ask him when I get there."

"You will be too busy explaining why he should let *you* in." She fingered a brooch at her throat. "I have been thinking—"

"Dangerous for an old woman to think."

She brandished an index finger menacingly. "I will give you old woman." The finger settled on me. "You sit." The finger swung to the door. "She sits." She spread her hands. "She must work weekends for Ruthanne, but Monday—why not sit together?"

"Encouraging a man and a woman to be together in one of your rooms? How will you explain to St. Peter?"

"There will be nothing to explain," she said smugly.

"Don't underestimate me because I'm in a wheelchair."

"Underestimate nothing." She smiled sweetly. "The young woman has good taste. What would she want with someone as ugly as you?"

The tap at the door Monday afternoon was hesitant.

Since it was never locked, I said, "Come in."

Friday night her hair had been gathered up somehow. Now it hung to her shoulders, full and wavy, with the sheen and richness of polished bronze. Even though I'd studied her through the glasses, the beauty masked by the heavy makeup was a complete surprise; the only flaw the faint shadow etched below the eyes by whatever drove her.

The baggy white T-shirt, worn jeans, and sneakers were clearly out of the discount shop next to Ruthanne's, yet that sweaty field hand remark was easy to understand.

In her thirties, old enough to no longer be impressed by herself, if she ever had been. I could only wonder what internal demon drove her to daub on that grotesque mask and act like a tramp in a second-rate movie.

"I understand you might like company."

"So you thought you'd take pity on a poor cripple?"

The blue eyes didn't flinch: "I thought the preferred words were physically disadvantaged."

"They've progressed to physically challenged."

She retreated a step. "If you'd rather be alone—"

I held up a hand and smiled. "Make yourself at home."

The afternoon was filled with pleasant talk. It was obvious she'd sat at so many dinner tables she'd mastered the art of Making Conversation with a Stranger While Saying Nothing About Yourself.

When she rose to leave, she ran her fingers across the titles on my bookshelf.

"A man forced to spend some time in a wheelchair like you told me he'd been reading one day and decided he could write better than the author. He wasn't wrong. Today, he's famous. You remind me of him in many ways. Perhaps you should try."

"Who is he? I could ask for a few tips—"

She smiled. "Would you like me to stop by again?"

"You're welcome anytime. Even Friday evening."

A shadow passed across her face. I felt I had offended her and she'd never be back.

The writing remark had

struck home, though. I'd often been irritated by articles and stories critical of the police written by people who hadn't been there, and while I might not be capable of refuting them, I had plenty of time to try.

Metzger, the resident computer genius at headquarters, was a kid who had left the farm for electronics, long blond hair, a gold earring, and a supply of NFL T-shirts.

He picked up a computer for me, connected it, and grunted with satisfaction when the monitor came to life.

"You already know how to operate the word processing end, Miles, but if you want to jump into the pool with the rest of us computer crazies, I'll be glad to show you which buttons to push."

"I fervently hope that day never arrives."

The computer brought a smile on her next visit.

"Don't look so smug," I said. "I haven't written anything yet."

"You will."

Reconciling the woman on the corner every Friday night with the one who visited me was impossible. As much relationship between them as between Jekyll and Hyde, but I looked at her one day and my heart turned over as I realized that the hours she spent with me flew and the ones she didn't dragged, and her

visits had become a time of forgetting the bitterness and the pain of my leg; a time to be cherished when old; and a time that would never be again because lurking deep was the painful knowledge that while I would never have more, what little I did have was certain to end.

It began to come apart one warm Friday evening in July because those who imagined themselves great lovers and irresistible were bound to show up, among them Morgan.

Morgan. Six feet tall. Long dark hair pigtailed. Heavy eyebrows. Brutal lips ready to twist in a sneer. Heir to Clint Morgan, the closest thing we had to a crime boss, running gambling, prostitution, and the little dope traffic we had without being tagged with any of it.

One essential difference between father and son.

Clint was a cold, hard man, driven to acquiring wealth and power. If he had to hurt someone, it was strictly business. Nothing personal. But his son laughed when told I'd limp for the rest of my life. Whatever his problem was, he *liked* to hurt people.

Especially women.

As much as we wanted to put the old man away, we'd have preferred to get the son off the streets. A mean old dog that chews on people who get in his

way is one thing. A rabid young one running amok is another.

The Porsche pulled up; young Morgan left it and walked up to her, taking her by the arm possessively. She shook him off and backed away. He said something, and she slapped him so hard, he staggered. Laughter burst from the watchers. Morgan's fist rose, and he'd have hit her if Hendrix, watching from the police car, hadn't leaned on the horn. Morgan climbed into his car and took off, flashing by beneath my window.

Being turned down by a woman like that was humiliating, but the laughter was worse. He couldn't let it pass.

She went through three men before selecting one. It was after midnight before I heard her come in.

Although unspoken, it was understood that I would never wheel myself down the hall. I wouldn't see her until Monday.

I called Ruthanne in the morning. "She won't know the kind of man Morgan is. You'd better explain why she can't let him catch her alone."

"I'll use all the bad words I know, Miles."

I called Richards.

"Morgan won't let it pass, not after those people laughed at him."

"Relax, Miles. He'll have a hard time getting to her. She

only goes out to work. The rest of the time she stays in except for Friday night, and there are too many witnesses then."

"He'll try, somehow."

"Until he does, we can only watch."

I buzzed Mrs. Schneider to come up.

"Morgan is a dangerous man, a sick man. He'll try to hurt her. She may think Ruthanne exaggerates. You should tell her, too. Tell her to be careful, even stay off that corner on Friday night." I took a deep breath. "We both know she doesn't belong here, picking up men on the street. Someone somewhere must be looking for her. Did she ever say anything to you?"

"Never. She receives no phone calls or mail."

"Have you ever seen anything in her room that might tell us—"

"Only a picture of a small boy. Five or six years old. It has a gold frame."

"Take a look at it. Some photographers stamp their name on the back."

"I am not one to snoop."

"St. Peter won't hold it against you."

She reported that the talk had been cut off, but the idea I'd planted had piqued her curiosity. The name on the back of the photo couldn't be read because it

had been scrubbed over with a felt tip.

The high point of my day had been watching her leave the bus at the corner and look up and wave. That night the buses came and went. I called Ruthanne at six.

"I put her on the bus at five, Miles. She should've been there in twenty minutes."

I called Richards. He called back an hour later. The driver remembered her getting on, but the bus had been jammed. Probably left through the rear door, but he had no idea when. Couldn't have seen her. Too many people.

At eleven, Richards' car pulled up, and I turned the wheelchair toward the door, my chest tight.

"A man walking his dog in the river park heard her moan. She's in the hospital. Beaten worse than any of his others, but she'll live. She won't say what happened."

"But we know."

"Sure, but we can't prove it. Not yet. Someone must have seen something. I'll bring Morgan in anyway."

He didn't find him. His father said he'd left early that afternoon to do a little fishing at the family lodge in the Endless Mountains. One bus passenger vaguely remembered her leaving, perhaps with a man. He wasn't sure. People on public

transportation never really look at each other.

Ruthanne brought her home five days later. Watching her painful progress up the stairs and into her room, I'd have traded my other leg to get my hands on Morgan. Ruthanne wheeled me back into mine. "I raised hell for letting her go so soon, but talking to those hospital people is like telling a politician taxes are too high. They sit there and watch your lips move. The bill had been paid. I guess we know who paid it."

The other beaten women had had their bills paid, too. Cash in a white envelope with their name on the outside that had appeared mysteriously on the cashier's desk. Morgan's father, cleaning up after his son.

"Must be something I can do," I said inanely, knowing damned well there wasn't.

I could see the compassion in her eyes.

"Leave her alone, Miles. No woman wants to be seen like that. She'll open that door only for me and Mrs. Schneider. I'll be by every day, so I can tell you anything you want to know."

When she went back to work, Ruthanne picked her up and brought her home, stopping in to let me know how she was doing. One evening Ruthanne came in, closed the door, folded her arms, and leaned back against it.

"The prescription they gave her for the painkiller called for one renewal. They won't give her another. She should be able to handle it by now with the over-the-counter stuff, they said."

I knew what was coming.

"It looks like that prescription not only took away the physical pain, it eased whatever was driving her to that corner. They don't call it happy dust for nothing, Miles. Since she couldn't turn her nightmares into dreams legally, she found a substitute. It's a wonder she didn't try that route long ago."

I'd gone through it. Those pills had made my world so rosy even Morgan no longer mattered. I'd settled for the pain because I didn't want to forget. She did.

"What are we going to do? Talking is no good. I'd drag her to the psychiatrist at the hospital, but he already tried when she was in there. All he could learn was she's probably smarter than he is. The person who needs help has to take Step One, Miles. If she won't..."

To hell with unspoken understandings. I wheeled myself down the hall to pound on the door so often, I left a track in Mrs. Schneider's rug. The door was never opened.

She went back to the corner on Friday nights, no longer par-

ticular, taking the first man who came along. Obviously, the men were paying.

Soon she was on the corner every night. Ruthanne could never pay her enough. No job could.

I pleaded with Richards to have a judge place her in rehab.

He paced the room. "Not yet. Her supplier gets the stuff from Morgan. You know that psycho. When he's ready, he'll cut her off to make her come begging to him. That's when he'll make her pay ten times over for those people laughing at him. The beating will look like love play."

"He may do her a favor. She's a proud woman—"

"Hell, Miles, you know those little glassine bags wipe out pride this fast." He snapped his fingers. "But I'm hoping she has enough left, along with some good old fashioned desire for revenge, to work with us. He's on probation. A drug charge on top of that, even his father can't save him."

I stared at him. "How?"

"You. Get her to talk him into coming to her room. I'll hide out there."

He'd hide out there? The chief? I didn't have to ask why. Taking down young Morgan himself would send a message to Clint—never forget this was his town.

His lips tightened at the look on my face. "Dammit, Miles, if

you want to save her, you have no choice."

When he called three days later to tell me she'd been cut off and was probably climbing the walls, I wheeled down the hall and knocked.

"This time I stay," I said loudly. The door opened.

The shadows under her eyes were deeper and her face thinner, but the look of quality was still there, like the last touch of green in a dying plant that needed only tender care to restore it to full bloom.

"Go away." The door began to swing shut.

I rammed through and spun the chair. "Forgotten your manners? You don't close your door in the face of a friend. Or maybe I'm presuming too much, and you really were taking pity on a poor cripple. All I wanted to tell you was that if you want to destroy yourself, fine, but while you're about it, do something for others who deserve better."

The set of the jaw was telling me to get out of her life. I started talking anyway. When I finished, she picked up the photo of the young boy Mrs. Schneider had mentioned and stared at it. Then her face softened, and she reached out and touched my cheek and for a moment it was like it was before Morgan came along.

"For a friend. I'll see that he comes here."

"He has to bring the drugs."

She seemed amused. "I haven't lost everything. Yet."

"Richards will be in the kitchenette. I'll be in the hallway. We'll protect you."

That seemed to amuse her more.

Young Morgan drove up late that night. He left the car, walking fast as if in anticipation, never glancing at the man across the street.

I alerted Richards on the walkie-talkie.

When I heard her door close, I wheeled myself into the hall, my .38 in my lap. A shadow had moved to the foot of the stairs.

Voices murmured, rose, then the sounds of a scuffle, the unexpected crash of a gun, Richards' shout cut off by another report. The door slammed open, Morgan backing into the hall, the gun in his hand.

Mouth dry, I croaked, "Morgan!"

He whirled, the gun coming up.

I shot him in the chest. He spun over the railing and tumbled down the stairs. From somewhere below, Mrs. Schneider screamed.

Richards appeared holding his shoulder, blood seeping through his fingers.

Behind him, Cass Fleming lay

on the floor, and an iciness that would never thaw settled deep inside.

"Nothing I could do," he said quietly. "We never knew how much pride she really had. She laughed at him and told him off in the coldest voice I ever heard. She said it would be an honor to be with the dirtiest bum she could find rather than with him, and then she slapped him again. Morgan wasn't going to take that twice."

"He never carried a gun."

"He took it from her. Maybe she intended to shoot him and claim self-defense. Maybe she intended to let him take it, hoping he was mad enough to use it on her. Either way he was the loser."

I couldn't help the bitterness in my voice. "Where the hell were you?"

"I could only hear. I stepped out just as he pulled the trigger on her. He panicked and tried for me."

He could have been on that floor along with her, but there was no accusation in his voice.

"It wasn't for herself. She wanted to put Morgan away for good, whichever way it turned out. The thing that set him off was when she told him that even with one good leg, you were twice the man he was."

I rolled down the hall to my room, locked the door, and

pulled the shades. No tomb could be colder or lonelier.

Richards and I had a great deal of explaining to do, but it all faded quickly because no one really gave a damn except Clint Morgan, and even he didn't want to keep it alive. Bad for business and business came first, and a man like that has other ways to even the score. So Richards walks very carefully, and I keep my .38 close.

Richards, Mrs. Schneider, Ruthanne, and I were the only mourners at her funeral. Others might have wept if they'd known, but Richards hadn't been able to find them.

Disposing of her few possessions, Mrs. Schneider gave me the photo of the small boy. The resemblance was unmistakable. I removed it from the frame. As she had said, the photographer's stamp had been obliterated with a felt tip pen. Just a blotch when looked at directly, but when held at an angle, the unclogged pores of the paper had taken on a matte finish while the stamped letters had a sheen. Rocking the print gently, I deciphered the name, address, and phone number. In Alexandria, Virginia.

I called. A studio photo of a boy had been found among the effects of an unidentified mug-

ging victim. If I sent a fax, could they tell me who the boy was?

They'd try.

Metzger brought a fax machine. A half hour later, the pleasant-voiced woman called. They couldn't be certain, but the boy appeared to be Jonathan Reynolds, who had died in a traffic accident at least a year ago. She gave me the name of the father.

Metzger smirked and connected the modem he'd also brought, in hack heaven at the thought of invading someone's privacy.

I leaned back and closed my eyes. My cast had been replaced by a brace, the wheelchair by a walker. All the practice and therapy in the world can't substitute for the actual use. My leg throbbed.

Every so often, I'd hear Metzger whistle softly and print out something. Close to dawn he said, "As far as I go, Miles. A lot of this is public record. Some isn't. If I punch another key, the Feds come and get me."

He scooped up a sheaf of papers and handed it to me. "I never saw any of this."

I wished I never had either, but the feeling that something was missing gnawed at me. If I ever again expected to have a good night's sleep, I had to find it. As soon as I was capable. While my right leg was fine for

driving, the left needed strengthening before it could hold up on a long trip.

A month later I was outside, propped on my walker and flexing my leg as the movers loaded their semi. My pitiful possessions could have gone in the minivan I'd bought, but Mrs. Schneider's forty years of acquisitions couldn't.

I was moving to the rancher, and she was joining me as housekeeper. The rationale was that the steep flight of stairs was too much for both of us.

In reality, I could no longer live in that room with the memory of sunlight and shadow playing on her face and hearing her voice, while Mrs. Schneider, already living with one ghost, had no desire to put up with two. A short, stocky man with sparse sandy hair parted on the side and a darker, bushy mustache that looked as though it came out of a theatrical makeup kit stepped out of a car that pulled to the curb.

He looked like a bookkeeper turned cop.

"You Miles? My name is Wheeler." He held up a Virginia state police badge. "Accident investigator. I've already seen the chief." He tapped the walker. "Can you make it to the hotel coffee shop so we can talk?"

When we'd settled at a table, he said their computer ace had

picked up the search and found it was coming through a private number. Very strange. Why was someone interested in a case closed some time ago? He decided to say nothing and look into it himself as soon as he found time.

"Believe what you read in my report?"

It said she'd been driving under the influence when her car ran off the road and the boy was killed—manslaughter charges deferred because she'd been institutionalized.

"I knew there was more."

He watched the movers, his face taut.

"The driver who called the accident in on his car phone didn't witness it. He just noticed headlights pointing at the sky at the foot of a slope. Naturally she was banged up, but the shock was worse. Didn't know left from right or up from down. The only thing her mind retained was that since she was driving and her son died it was her fault."

He stirred his coffee. "I think it was so fast she never really knew what happened. Bad night for driving on a two-lane blacktop. Fog and rain. But any good investigator has a sixth sense that tells him when the pieces don't fit. I talked to that driver again. A black Bentley had passed him, moving fast. Her husband drove a Bentley,

but I was told to leave him alone. After all, he'd lost his son. Told to leave her alone, too. Couldn't ask questions, like why was she headed away from home? Why was the boy with her? Wearing pajamas? He should've been safe in bed. And why two suitcases in the car? So I did a little extracurricular snooping.

"The right rear quarter of her husband's Bentley was bashed in as if he'd cut in too soon after passing. Now, he's one of those men you never hear about but very big with senators and congressmen. He'd signed in with a couple on a big shady deal. A congressional investigation was coming up. Looks bad for a wife to walk out at a time like that. I think she was leaving. He took after her and forced her off the road. He may have simply wanted to stop her, but the slope was steep enough to roll the car. He also didn't know the boy was with her. Guess who took the blame for the boy's death?"

"Wasn't the breathalyzer test positive?"

"Nowhere near the limit. Probably had a drink to get her nerve up." The knuckles around the coffee cup grew white. "Nice man, her husband. She's drowning in a sea of guilt, but it suited him to hold her head under. On her way to meet a lover, he told the court."

"Did she have one?"

"With a husband like that, it wouldn't surprise me, but what woman takes her kid along? No lover surfaced. The point is that, with a little testimony from a couple of his flacks, he convinced the judge—hell, for all I know, he bought him off—that the boy died because she was unstable and irresponsible and needed help. So the judge deferred charges on the condition she receive psychiatric treatment. When your inquiry turned up, I couldn't figure why someone out here would be checking on him. Then I said, oh-oh. I called the place he sent her to, telling them it was a routine follow-up. They took too long to tell me she was still a patient. Only her husband allowed to see her. Clear to me they were covering up."

"How did she get out?"

"No idea until your chief told me the name she was using. I was in court when a doctor and nurse took her out. The nurse was named Fleming. Care to bet she has a family member whose death was never reported to the Social Security administration?"

"Would the institution tell him she's gone?"

"Those people would have no choice. He probably paid them to do nothing for her, which would explain Nurse Fleming, who probably had a conscience. I

doubt they'll cooperate in anything else. He's stuck. How much more would he have to pay to get a divorce from a woman who doesn't exist? Or to have her declared dead? When no one can be sure she won't turn up any time? With her memory restored? I'll bet he has a P.I. agency looking for her."

I pushed my cold coffee aside.

"Intend to tell him what you've found?"

"Like hell," he snapped. "This is a private visit. Tell him? Let the bastard sweat. I'm only sorry I can't do more to the creep, but I know what I'm up against."

Her husband was another Morgan, in a way. The world simply hadn't caught up with him yet.

"The accident happened on a Friday night? At nine?"

"Explains a lot, doesn't it?"

I opened my eyes and danced the cursor across the screen with the space bar. It left no trace—like most of us as we move from cradle to grave—but she'd left a mark, such as it was. Locally, any heavily made-up woman clearly on the hustle is called a Nine O'Clock Woman. Only a few know her husband forced her to play a role she never wanted.

I turned off the computer and

scooped up my replies to a few letters generated by my articles.

"Post office!" I yelled for Mrs. Schneider's benefit.

Fall leaves swirling around my feet, I leaned on my cane and dispassionately studied a black paint streak on the battered white of the right rear quarter on my mud-splattered minivan. Fine car, a Bentley, but the driver of any car collected bruises when it rolled down a slope.

Behind the wheel, I placed the mail beside me.

A friend in Tucson would forward the contents of the top envelope—a preaddressed color photo postcard showing a wristwatch with the hands set at nine, positioned on the Friday page of a one-day-at-a-time desk calendar, the boy's photo in the background.

After he leaves the hospital, her husband will get another now and then, each mailed from a different city.

In Wheeler's words—let him sweat.

Halfway to the post office, the reason I couldn't get the story of the Nine O'Clock Woman on paper finally dawned—it needed an ending.

The one I had in mind would be a real screamer.

FICTION

POPPED IN THE POT PATCH

David Braly



Illustration by Dan Krovat

35

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/96

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We waited for him with the body. We hoped he wouldn't get lost on the way. It would be easy to get lost. We were in one of the least accessible areas of the forest, reached from the highway only after numerous turns on many serpentine roads. And even after he found where we had parked, he would still have to walk another quarter-mile through brush and trees. Whoever had planted the marijuana patch had chosen the place carefully. But it took the sheriff less time to come out here from Sawyerville and find us than it took me to come the shorter distance from Crosby Road.

He came lumbering over the wild grass, his huge bulk at first mostly hidden by the shadows of the sunshot hemlocks, firs, and pines, until finally he was in full view in his tan jacket, sweat-damp white shirt, and crooked tie of cheaply printed coruscating mottlings tramping toward us with a celerity uncharacteristic of both his physical composition and his mental propensity. I had never seen Harry Traphagen walk so fast. True, this was the first murder in Metolius County in all the years he'd been sheriff. But it was difficult to believe he cared even about murder. It was difficult to believe the grotesque slug cared about anything other than win-

ning reelection and receiving payoffs. Yet for once in his life he looked sincerely aghast. When he finally trudged out of the dark woods and into the small, dank, forest-immured glade where we were waiting, and stood panting there beside us wiping the sweat from his face with a polychromatic handkerchief, he stared bug-eyed at the fresh cadaver.

Three of us were now there, of the living. Specifically, Traphagen, myself (Gabe Randell, Traphagen's chief deputy), and Frank Waggoner, the Forest Service law enforcement officer for the Metolius National Forest. Frank was a clean-cut fellow, tall, slender, with hair so black it looked blue. He had radioed for us when he realized that the particular section in which he had found the body, at eight twenty-five that morning, was not legally part of the national forest. It had been the private property of a local lumber company until the last recession, when the county grabbed it for back taxes.

Traphagen stared at the body for more than a minute, looking back and forth from it to the marijuana plants. They were ten feet tall. Usually such plants are harvested when they're about fourteen feet, but they could have been cut now and still earned their anony-

mous grower at least seventy thousand dollars. Finally he walked around the body, as though he might get a more instructive view on the one side than on the other. After a moment he went back to the other side again, and while he did, he removed his straw hat and used the handkerchief to wipe the sweatband. He put the hat back on and stuffed the handkerchief in his hip pocket. He stopped.

"Don't I know this man?" he asked, his usually low, gravelly voice more high-pitched than normal.

"Could be," I said. "It's Marksham. He has the little printing shop on Third Street between the beauty shop and the taxidermist's. He also has an advertising business of some sort with Colton."

"Colton? You mean the photographer? The one above the hardware store who does the babies and weddings?"

"That's him."

"I didn't know about any advertising business."

"It's strictly small fry. I wouldn't know about it myself 'cept they printed some posters for Greg when he ran for council. Mostly he just operated the printing shop."

"What was he doing in the middle of the forest?"

"That's what we can't figure," I said. "There's no backpack.

Maybe whoever killed him took it, but it doesn't seem likely. It isn't hunting season, so he wouldn't be out here for deer. There's no good fishing in the area. No thunder eggs or agates or other things for rockhounds. There's nothing here except this pot patch. Whatever brought him out here, obviously it was the patch that got him killed. He found it, and the grower killed him."

"Unless Marksham was the grower," said Frank. "It might be that he found someone here, and they had words, and then the stranger up and killed him. It mighta even been self-defense."

"Ain't likely," I said.

"Didn't say it was likely, Gabe. Said it was possible."

"Yeah, it's possible, but it ain't likely."

Traphagen's face was twisted in disgust. I had the feeling that it wasn't just the cadaver that annoyed him. He didn't like what he was hearing. He didn't agree with one or the other of us. I figured it had to be Frank.

"Let's not go jumping the gun," he said. "You both may be wrong."

"Now, sheriff," said Frank, "how the hell could we both be wrong? It has to be one or the other. He was either the grower or killed by the grower. Other-

wise, why's he here by the patch?"

I detected a condescending tone in Frank's voice. Traphagen must have heard it, too. The sheriff's expression turned vitriolic. He looked as though he wanted to close his yellow teeth on Frank's throat and bite. Traphagen was almost as mean as he was corrupt.

"I can't guess why he's in the patch," snapped the sheriff. "I can only believe, though, that you are both wrong."

"But why?" persisted Frank. "Logic dictates—"

"Logic smogic!"

"Huh? What the hell does that mean?"

Instead of answering, the sheriff slowly circled the body again. He whipped out the handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his brow and his stubbled cheeks and under his jaw and on his neck. I noticed the grey eyes. He kept his nose towards the cadaver, as though it were the focus of his interest, but those mean little eyes were moving restlessly. He was thinking really hard about something. Finally he stuffed the handkerchief halfway back into his hip pocket and came around to us again.

"You wanna talk logic? Okay. Here's logic. If Marksham were the grower, why kill him? You say self-defense? He ain't got no gun. And why would a man who

had defended himself take the gun? Hell, he'd want us to know about it just in case we caught him later."

"Maybe the gun was valuable."

"More valuable than his freedom? If you murdered somebody, Frank, would you take the man's gun? Probably somebody could identify it. Would you wanna have it in your possession after you'd killed him? People who kill usually ditch the gun even when it's their own."

"Okay," said Frank. "I'll admit the theory has problems. But why couldn't it be the grower who murdered him?"

"The man who phoned you anonymously musta been the killer. Why, hell, he had to have been the killer. What're the odds of two people stumbling onto this patch about the same time, when obviously nobody did earlier in all the months these plants grew from seedlings to ten foot high? The man who killed him is the same man who reported the murder. So you think about it. If you were the grower, would you murder a man to protect your patch and then direct us to the patch? Even if you wanted us to find the body, you would move the body first."

He was right, of course. And the fact that he was right was

only slightly more amazing than the fact that he had bothered to reason it out at all. He was really interested! Harry Traphagen, paragon of corruption and indolence, had involved himself in a case. I could scarcely believe what I was witnessing. However, as I said, we had not had a murder in the county during the many years he'd been sheriff. Perhaps some crimes were sufficiently egregious that even Traphagen would try to solve them. And it turned out that although he was corrupt, mean, and evil, Harry Traphagen was really quite clever.

"What we need to find out," he said, "is who this man's enemies were. Was he married?" I affirmed that he was. "We'll notify his widow, then, and we'll ask her about his enemies. After that, we'll ask the photographer. Between the pair of them, we ought to learn something."

He looked down at the cadaver for a moment. He then looked around at the forest. Only the closest trees could be seen. The conifers were dark and thick and serried, tightly surrounding the glade in a towering blue-green and black wall. They were richly redolent in the hot, heavy, humid air. The songs of a hundred birds emanated from them, but not one bird could be seen.

"A nice spot to rest for eterni-

ty," I said, guessing his thoughts. "But a bit lonely."

"Well, he sure as hell ain't gonna rest here for eternity," snapped Traphagen. "Somebody's gotta get his body back to town."

"Oh." So much for guessing his thoughts. "Right."

"I don't envy them, either. I'll hate just walking back to my car through that forest in this damned heat. I hate to think what it'd be like helping carry a body, everybody trying to keep in line and in step. I'll bet they drop the poor sonofabitch at least once. Probably more. Hell of a place to plant a pot patch."

"Actually, it's a good place," said Frank. "Little chance that anybody would discover it here. No telling how many other patches are hidden in the forest. It ain't as though the growers have to walk in every day and tend the plants. They just put 'em in and stay away until the plants are ready to be cut."

"I'll bet they drop him at least once."

"He won't know it."

"I'm glad I won't be helping to carry the sonofabitch," Traphagen said again. "I guess we'd better get some reserve deputies to do it. I just wish I didn't have to walk back through there."

"Well," drawled Frank, "I don't think they'd be willing to carry you out, sheriff."

Before I could stop myself, I burst out laughing. Traphagen glared at me.

"Gabe," he said, "you'll have to arrange for the destruction of the patch. That is, after you get somebody to photograph the body and sketch the position and bag it for the medical examiner so he can do whatever examinations he'll need to do."

We started back through the woods.

We'd been back in town only an hour before I completed the arrangements for the medical examiner and photographs. Traphagen learned from the taxidermist that Marksham had been in the printing shop the day before when she closed at five o'clock. Which told us he died sometime that evening, because rigor mortis had already set in. Also within that hour we had our first suspect: Elaine Marksham.

She lived in a fusty little wooden house with peeling brown paint and a tight yard on Cattail Road, a short street near the murky irrigation canal that runs through the north part of town. A huge willow tree occupied the front yard, and a Ford half-ton pickup truck the drive.

Elaine Marksham was a tall, slender, athletic-looking woman of about forty years. There wasn't a pound of fat on her. She had the dark, taut skin and the

sinewy arms and neck of an outdoor person. That's what she was. The tiny living room had a wall laden with framed photographs, many of Elaine Marksham herself waterskiing, snowmobiling, and backpacking.

But the backpacking wasn't what made her a suspect, it was the accumulation of many things. It did help when Traphagen asked her about a photograph and elicited the information that she often went backpacking alone in the forest. It helped, too, when she admitted that she owned a gun. And when she revealed that she'd left Ernie Marksham a year ago. All of it helped.

"Listen, I'm sorry somebody plugged him." She was seated on an old sofa, her legs crossed and her arms folded across her stomach. She wore a checkered red and white shirt with a pair of prefaded bluejeans. Her feet were bare. "We had something special once. It was finished long ago. I can't claim I'm going to cry for him, sheriff. But I'm sorry he died that way."

"Do you know if he had any enemies?"

"Sure. Hayward Sinclair."

"Who's he?"

"He and Ernie used to be pals. But Ernie was always cadging money from Hayward. He was quite a borrower even back in

high school. Anyway, one day Hayward got into a jam. His son had a medical emergency. The kid wasn't a year old at the time. Hayward asked Ernie to pungle up the money he'd been borrowing over the years. All of it at once. Ernie wouldn't. Mind you, he could've. But he wouldn't. He even denied owing half of it. Well, after that, Hayward hated him. He's beaten him up twice that I know of, although that was years ago. Both times Ernie got the police after him. Last time he even sued him for medical and punitive damages. Got 'em, too. About five thousand dollars. That didn't make Hayward any friendlier toward him. Hayward once even threatened to kill him."

"When was that?" asked Traphagen.

"Just before I left him. A little over a year ago. They'd tangled in one of the bars. No violence, though. Just words—and the threat."

"Anyone else hate him?"

She thought about it for a minute. "No one that I know of," she said at last. "I sure didn't like him, but I didn't hate him."

"Where were you during the last twenty-four hours?"

"I work in one of the grocery stores. Yesterday I was there in the morning and afternoon. After I got off work, I came home. Didn't go out again yesterday.

Just watched television with my dog. Didn't have to go to work this morning. Today I'll be working the afternoon and evening shifts. I've been home this morning doing housework."

"Can you prove it?"

"No. No one came to the door. No one phoned. So far as I know, nobody's been watching the house. My neighbors might be able to tell you that my pickup's been here since late yesterday afternoon."

"Why did you leave him?"

"He was hollow. All there was to him was on the surface. There was no substance underneath it. I couldn't believe half of what he told me. He was chronically unfaithful."

"Did he see anyone after you left him?"

"For a few months he dated a waitress at the Wigwam. Later she married a farmhand. The last I heard was that he was seeing a married woman. I don't know her name. I don't even know if it's true. It's just what I heard. But it would fit his style."

Traphagen asked for her gun, and she produced it. We couldn't tell merely by looking if it had been fired recently. We would send it to the state ballistics lab in Salem.

We asked around the neighborhood about the pickup. The woman who lived across the road from Elaine Marksham

confirmed that it had been there yesterday evening and this morning. She couldn't swear that it hadn't been moved between those periods, though. She asked us to do something about Elaine's dog, which barked too much. Traphagen told her that barking dogs were a city problem and he was a county officer.

"The only people I know who disliked Ernie," said Nick Colton, "were his wife and a fellow who works for the Forest Service."

Colton, an obese man in his late thirties with tawny hair and forever shifting olive eyes, was seated in a kitchen chair tilted back from his cluttered steel desk. Traphagen had lowered his own bulk onto the only other chair, and I stood beside him. Noon sunlight streamed through the two windows, illuminating dust motes floating in the fuggy air of the studio's cramped little office. It was on the second floor of an old red brick building whose main floor housed one of the town's two hardware stores.

"A fellow who works for the Forest Service?" asked the sheriff. "Who might that be?"

"Let me think. The first name was unusual. I think the last name was Sinclair."

"Hayward Sinclair?"

"That's him. He hated Ernie's guts. I don't know why. But he sure as hell hated him."

Traphagen looked up at me. Neither of us had thought to ask Elaine Marksham about Sinclair's occupation. But she'd known her husband was killed in the forest. So it was odd that she hadn't mentioned it.

"I understand that you and Marksham were business partners," said Traphagen.

"Well, if you could call it a business, we were. Ernie had the little printing shop over on Third. Some of his customers wanted photo work on their printing. Pictures of their stores on advertising flyers, for example. But he was all thumbs doing photographic work. He used to pay me for it. Finally, since his costs and mine were about the same, we decided it would be simpler just to be partners on those jobs, splitting the costs and the profits right down the middle. For awhile we even thought it might be the start of a growing and profitable business. But we each only netted a few hundred a year on the arrangement."

"What was your own personal relationship like with Marksham?"

"Excellent. We never had any problems."

"Where were you during the last twenty-four hours?"

"I came to work about nine yesterday. Went out for lunch about noon. Returned about an hour later. I was here after that until nine thirty, then went home."

Traphagen's eyes narrowed. "Here until nine thirty? Do you always work so late?"

"Well, no. But I do occasionally. I was in the darkroom developing film I'd shot for the highway department. I do mostly family photographs, but I get a few assignments from magazines and government agencies. I like to do them good and fast. That way, the next time they need someone, they're more likely to get in touch with me."

"Any witnesses to your whereabouts?"

"Sure. My wife for yesterday morning and for the time after nine thirty yesterday and for this morning until about nine. Jim down in the hardware store waved to me when I came up. He saw me yesterday morning, too, and at noon. The waitresses over at the Main Street Cafe can verify I spent most of yesterday noon in there."

"What about yesterday evening between the time the hardware store closed and the time you went home?" asked the sheriff.

"Well . . ." Colton appeared to give the question a lot of thought. Finally: "I don't guess

there was anybody. But I had no reason to kill Ernie. And it's been years since I went out into the forest."

"I would like to see the photographs you developed."

"No problem."

He took us into the darkroom and showed us a pile of prints stacked on a small cabinet near the long sink. There were about a hundred of them. I recognized the scenery as being along Highway 26, far from the murder scene. Of course, there was no way of knowing when he'd actually developed the film.

We checked with Jim on the way out, and he confirmed what Colton had said. But he could not confirm that the photographer had stayed until nine thirty the previous evening, only that Colton often worked late. Although access to the studio was through the hardware store, Colton had his own key and could come and go as he wished.

When we stepped outside onto the cracked sidewalk, Traphagen lit a cigarette and folded his arms atop a parking meter. He stood in that manner for several minutes, smoking and thinking and staring unseeing at the cars and pickups heading this way or the other on Division.

"I don't like it," he said at last. "Two people without alibis. I

wanna wrap this up today. I don't want it dragging on."

"There ain't an election this year."

"That ain't the point."

What the point might have been he didn't see fit to explain. He flipped the cigarette into the street and lumbered toward the car. I followed.

Hayward Sinclair was a tall, beak-nosed man with sandy hair and perpetually indignant brown eyes. He had a small cubicle in the Forest Service building, a trim little desk beside a Venetian-blinded window, and a swivel chair facing the desk and three visitors' chairs. We sat in two of the chairs and faced the desk and Sinclair and the partition behind him laden with a corkboard covered with a multitude of government memos, notices, and graphs. We learned that he oversaw road construction and maintenance in the national forest.

"I can't say that I'm sorry he's dead," said Sinclair, "but I didn't kill him. If I were gonna kill Ernie Colton, I woulda done it fifteen years ago when I learned what a chiseler he was."

"Can you account for your time yesterday and today?" asked Traphagen.

"Sure. I came to work yesterday at eight, left at four, went home, had dinner with my wife

and kids, went down to the Elks club at seven or seven thirty, was there until maybe nine, went over to the Wigwam for a drink or two, drove home about eleven, watched the news on television, and went to bed about eleven thirty. Got up at six, had breakfast, read the paper, watched some television news, came to work at eight, went out to look at a road about nine thirty, got back here about a half hour ago."

Traphagen's chair screeched in protest when the sheriff leaned forward. "You say you were at the Wigwam last night from about nine until eleven. Who saw you there?"

"A lot of people. Probably the waitresses would remember me. Perhaps not. But I talked with Hiram Carter, Dick Reynolds, Tom Cureen, and Jack Russell while I was there. Oh, and Jack's brother Ben."

The chair screeched again when the sheriff settled back. I could see his disappointment. Sinclair had been our best suspect. Now it fell entirely on Elaine Marksham because Sinclair couldn't have done it and Colton had no motive.

"Do you know of any enemies Marksham had other than yourself?" asked Traphagen.

"His wife didn't like him. I don't think she actually hated him, though. And his partner in

that ad business probably had no love for him. I heard he'd been messing with the guy's wife."

The sheriff looked at me. There was no smile on his lips or in his eyes. It was something else. I guess you could call it a really cruel appearance of satisfaction.

By the time we got back to Colton's office it was mid-afternoon. The day had become a scorcher, and Traphagen was none the pleasanter for it. His usual grumpiness had flowered into an active viciousness, brought to the surface perhaps by all the driving, walking, talking, and other activity he had uncustomarily embarked upon. I believe that if a dog had crossed his path he would've bitten it.

"Hilda? That's a lie!" Colton shot up from his chair, and I thought for a moment he was going to assault Traphagen. But he didn't. Still, he was mad enough to do just about anything. "Hilda's never been with any other man since she married me."

There was more. Much more. Traphagen kept at him for almost an hour. But Colton wouldn't budge. Over and over again he insisted that Hilda had never been with any man other than himself. And we couldn't prove that he hadn't been in the dark-

room exactly as he claimed. But we were both certain of his guilt.

Until a few hours later. That's when the police chief, Mike McEaghlin, came into the sheriff's office and asked Traphagen what he'd told Colton. Traphagen asked him why.

"Why? I'll tell you why, Harry. 'Cause we just arrested the big sonofabitch for beating Hilda half to death, that's why. He went home and started pounding on her. She's up at the hospital."

Traphagen was seated at his desk, which faced the outdated calendar on the wall, but had swung his swivel chair around toward McEaghlin and myself. Flies were buzzing and were crawling up and down the closed upper halves of the tobacco-stained windows. Traphagen's straw hat was on the desk beside an empty scuppernong bottle. After thinking about what McEaghlin had said for a moment, Traphagen related what he'd told Colton.

"I guess that explains it," said McEaghlin. "He musta denied it out loud, but in his dark heart he believed it. When you finished questioning him, he headed home to punish his wife."

"Which means he didn't know about it before," I said. "Which means we're back to having no motive for Colton killing Marksham."

"Not necessarily," said Traphagen. "Maybe Colton had decided to hurt 'em both. First he murdered Marksham. Then, when we confronted him, he tries to clear himself by beating up his wife, which would make it appear that our telling him about the affair was the first he'd heard. It would also allow him to punish his wife without betraying himself. If he'd beaten her before, it would prove that he knew about the affair. This way it only makes him look more innocent."

Didn't I say old Harry was clever?

But not quite clever enough.

The day ended without the crime's being solved.

So did the week.

And the month.

And the summer.

And the year.

Fact was, I'd pretty much given up on his ever arresting anybody for it. And I'd gone back to my original theory that Marksham had been killed by the pot grower when he stumbled across the patch. The guy had probably called anonymously without moving the body because he'd been too overwhelmed and shocked by what he'd done. Traphagen treated the theory with contempt. Well, fine. He couldn't claim to have made any more progress himself. The only new information on the murder

came from the medical examiner, whose algor mortis examination confirmed the approximate time of death as the evening of the day before the discovery of the body, and the crime lab in Salem, which reported that Marksham had been shot through the heart at close range with a .30-06 rifle. Probably the barrel of the rifle was only two or three feet away when the killer pulled the trigger. Elaine's gun hadn't done it.

Nothing new turned up until the following summer. But it did turn up. And it was Traphagen who turned it up—at the barber shop.

He came into the office one afternoon and plopped a copy of a magazine onto my desk.

"We got our killer!" he said. "All we need is a search warrant."

I picked up the magazine and looked at it. It was a six-month-old slick regional tourist quarterly called *Pacific Northwest Vistas*, with an address sticker for Scott's Barber Shop.

"I assume you're talking about the Marksham case," I said. "What's this got to do with it?"

"Page forty-two," he said.

I went to page forty-two. An article started there entitled "Eastern Oregon's Giant National Forests." It profiled the Deschutes, Klamath, Fremont,

Ochoco, Metolius, Wallowa, and Malheur national forests. The article's author was Rhonda Freidel, whose name had not surfaced during our yearlong investigation. Old thickheaded me, I just didn't see the connection.

"I still don't understand."

"See the photograph illustrating the article?"

The article contained many photographs, but I assumed he meant the one on page forty-two. It was a panoramic view of a forested valley. The caption identified it as the Fly Spring area of the Metolius National Forest. I still didn't understand what—

And then I saw it.

Below the picture and above the caption were three tiny words: *Photograph: Nicholas Colton.*

The man—the suspect—who claimed he hadn't set foot in the forest for years.

I studied the photograph for a minute or two. Cumuli in an almost clear sky. Most of the foliage was evergreen, but I noticed a couple of leafy aspens in the farrago of trees. Meaning that the photograph had been taken in the summer or early autumn.

"It ain't enough to convict him," I said. "It could be a photograph he took years ago or after we talked with him."

"It's not. When I saw that, I got so excited I called that magazine's editor right there from the barber shop. Just billed the call to the county. The photo assignment was made exactly two weeks prior to the murder and the photographs from Colton arrived the same day as the murder."

"Well, that does prove he lied. But it won't convict him."

"It's enough for a search warrant."

"He won't still be holding onto the gun."

"We ain't just gonna look for the gun."

Judge Wenzel signed search warrants for Colton's house and studio. We went to the house first. Hilda Colton was more curious than hostile about the intrusion. She was an attractive brunette, slender with big blue eyes and a quiet manner; it surprised me that she'd ever dated Colton, let alone married him. We found nothing incriminating during an hourlong search. We discovered that Colton had several rifles, but none were .30-06's. Traphagen questioned Hilda about the guns.

"All I know," she said, "is that he's always had several rifles. I don't know how many or what types."

Nick Colton was visibly shaken when we showed up at his studio. Apparently Hilda had

not phoned him about our visit to the house; he'd had no warning that we were coming.

Colton tried to hold his temper in check, but he barely managed.

"This is ridiculous, sheriff." He was standing in front of the desk holding the search warrant that Traphagen had handed him. "I didn't kill Ernie. He was more than my partner, he was also my friend. If I'd known about him and Hilda, maybe I woulda killed him. But I didn't know. We went all over this a year ago."

"You killed him, all right. And I'm betting that you left me the proof."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I've even got a theory about how you did it." Traphagen walked over to one of the windows and looked down at the street for a moment. He turned around and smiled yellowly. "You learned about Marksham and your wife. And you were trying to figure out a way to kill him without getting caught when you stumbled onto the pot patch. And it became your solution."

"I don't know what you're talking about," repeated Colton, but I noticed he sounded less confident.

"You told Marksham about the patch. You suggested that

the two of you cut some of the plants and sell them. If you just cut and sold a few, you could rake in several grand. You said you knew somebody who would buy them. Markham didn't suspect you were lying and agreed. You warned that you had to be as afraid of the growers as you would of the cops, so you both had to be quiet about what you were doing. Really quiet. Don't tell anybody, you warned him. And so he went into the forest with you in the evening, with nobody aware of it. At the same time that you later claimed to be in your darkroom. And you took along a rifle, telling Marksham you needed it for protection, just in case you encountered the grower. A .30-06 that you disposed of immediately after you killed him."

Traphagen had pinned him. Colton's face betrayed it. He looked at the sheriff as though Traphagen were some sort of mind reader. His eyes were wide, and his mouth hung open. You could plainly see that what he wanted to ask was, "How did you know that?" and only barely managed to stop himself.

What he blurted out instead was, "You can't prove that."

Traphagen pulled out the magazine, which he'd kept folded up inside his jacket. He tossed it down on the desk behind Colton. Colton turned

around and picked it up and looked at it.

"You said you hadn't been in the forest for years," Traphagen reminded him. "But obviously you went into the Metolius National Forest last summer to shoot the photograph that appears on page forty-two. I don't know much about photography, but one thing I found out talking to the editor of that there magazine is that professional photographers shoot dozens of pictures for each that's submitted. Which means you shot a lot of pictures when you went out into the forest on the assignment."

Colton shrugged his shoulders and said, "So what?"

"So I'm betting you saved the negatives. That's what the search warrant is for."

For a moment Colton stood there silently. Finally he dropped the magazine on the desk and faced Traphagen again, looking more confident. I figured maybe he'd gotten rid of the negatives after all.

"Sheriff, I freely admit that I had an assignment in the Metolius National Forest shortly before Ernie's murder. I freely admit lying to you. I simply didn't want you drawing the wrong conclusion. It now appears that this was a valid concern. I didn't kill him. You can't prove that I did."

"Oh, I think I can. All I need are the negatives."

"I'll be glad to show them to you. What do you think they'll prove?"

"Whoever killed Marksham found the pot patch. He was the only one who did find it. I think the photographs will prove you found it. I think that when we take them to a Forest Service employee familiar with the area, he'll be able to reconstruct your exact route using those photographs. You probably didn't take a shot of the patch. But I'm willing to bet a nickel that if we run a line on a map from your first shot to your last, it will point straight at the patch. The negatives are numbered, so it will show us your direction of travel."

Colton turned ashen.

Within two hours we had him booked for murder. The negatives showed exactly what Traphagen had thought they would show. The numbers showed that he traveled right toward the patch, and the day apparently was free of breezes because the cloud formations barely moved the whole time, which precluded any claim by Colton that he'd taken some of the photographs one day, some another.

We didn't find any pictures of the actual patch, but it didn't matter because Colton was so demoralized that he made a full confession.

People were impressed by Traphagen's detective work.

Enough that they reelected him yet again. No one stopped to wonder why he'd been so anxious to solve the case. Or how he found the patch so fast that morning.

No matter. I haven't any proof. Other than Traphagen's meanness, which would include a vengeful determination to get

back at anyone who had cost him money, and, as I've mentioned, the fact that Traphagen himself was a crook. If any marijuana seeds had disappeared from the sheriff's evidence room, I never knew about it. But, of course, it was Traphagen who kept the key—and the inventory list.

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FICTION

NICK AND LIZZIE

Dan Crawford



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/96

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The Devil was in Iowa of a Sunday. You might think that was the last place on earth the old Devil'd be found, but he was actually like a kid with his nose against the candy counter, thinking everything looked so good and wondering where to start in.

It was while he was flying over one of those lonely country roads that he spied three black dots, one big square one and two thin ones off to one side. The smaller black dots kept moving, but the big one didn't move at all. That was the problem.

This was some years ago, you understand. What he saw, as he got up closer, was a beat-up old Model T Ford sitting on the dirt road while two men fought with the patched spare tire, trying to get it on in place of the tire that'd just gone flat. And the Devil could see the men were pastors on their way to services.

You see, there are parts of Iowa where you'll have half a dozen little churches without any of them having nearly enough worshippers to feed a minister. So the church would send a pastor to one town on the understanding that he'd use the church there as his home church but that he'd go out and preach to the others on a regular schedule. This was better, putting the preacher to the trouble rather than the preached-to. Tell a congregation it's got to shut up the little church in its own town and drive forty miles up to Eagle Oak for services, and you've just given everybody two more reasons to stay home of a Sunday.

To save the expense of keeping two cars, the Lutheran pastor and the Presbyterian pastor at Eagle Oak shared their schedule. They'd preach in Eagle Oak early Sunday, drive up to Busta for a late service and lunch, and then go down to West Wick for an afternoon service. Then they'd drive back to Eagle Oak. The next Sunday they'd do the same thing, only they'd drive to St. Jerome and Elk Rock instead of Busta and West Wick.

This involved considerable work, not lightened by the fact of their using a Model T, a dependable car in the sense that it wouldn't run any worse twenty years old and held together with baling wire than it did when it was new. What some folks called the Tin Lizzie, it would pull you through a snowstorm or the heat of August just the same, if you could get it started in the first place.

Well, the sight of two such busy preachers and a flat tire was too good for that old Devil to miss. He flew down, all invisible, to hear what he could hear.

There wasn't much. In the main, Iowans are quiet souls, and

though they do their share of cussing, it's generally under their breaths and to themselves. This is why Iowa does not rank high on most people's lists of good states for cussing. The Devil could hear the two men going at it, and he hoped one would maybe scold the other for such language on a Sunday. But they observed a kind of professional courtesy in that respect, and as I say, they were both so quiet about it, it could be that neither heard what the other was saying.

So that old Devil got really bored really quick. Now I understand what they say about Sundays in Iowa, he said to himself. There must be something I can do to liven things up a bit.

He stretched and yawned. Then, still all invisible, he flew up and climbed into the engine of the Model T. He naturally knew about machinery and could see right away where to put his hands and feet so as to run the thing himself from inside the motor.

"How's the time, Martin?" the Lutheran pastor asked once the wheel was all fixed up. "Will we make 'er on time?"

"Ought to be just in time, Walt," the Presbyterian pastor told him, moving up front to give the engine a crank. "If we don't have anything else happen."

You're going to have everything else happen, that old Devil promised. When the minister took hold of the crank, he had the other end. He wouldn't let the crank turn at all.

"Now what's wrong?" the Presbyterian minister exclaimed.

"What is wrong?" the Lutheran minister asked him from the driver's seat.

"Can't budge this thing, Walt."

"Try it the other direction, then."

"I did try it. You come try it."

The old Devil thought about starting the engine up with a kick so as to make the crank spin around and maybe break an arm. That'd keep services from going on in two churches at once, since the one preacher would naturally have to drive the other to the doctor. But then he had a better idea.

"Must just've been stuck," said the Lutheran pastor when the crank turned and the engine started up.

"They'll do that," agreed his partner. The two men climbed up into the old Ford and set off down the road.

They set off, though, in the wrong direction, moving straight backward. "What is it now?" the Presbyterian shouted.

"I don't know; I . . . there!"

The driver might have thought it was the way he planted his foot on the pedal that shifted the gears from reverse to forward. But it was that old Devil, who thereupon put the car into a jerky-stop, jerky-go, jerky-stop kind of motion, the kind a driver might achieve if it was his first time in a car. His plan was to get the Presbyterian minister to say something critical about the way his Lutheran colleague drove. Two men who worked together this way, he knew, had probably agreed not to argue about religion when there was business to be taken care of. But if he could get them to arguing about something else, it might be possible to break up their friendship. Then they'd each have to buy a car, which would cost the churches money and make the job more difficult for each man.

Failing that, the old Devil thought it would do if one or the other of the men could get so mad as to holler out some particularly choice cussing just as a member of the congregation happened to drive by. That sort of story could work its way through a congregation really quick, for everyone to be thinking about during the sermon.

While the Devil was looking forward to one or both of these happy outcomes, the Lutheran pastor looked at the Presbyterian and said, "Maybe we'd better walk."

The Presbyterian checked his watch. "Going to be mighty late."

"Oh, I don't believe we have to walk far," said the Lutheran, and jerked his head toward the hood of the car. The Presbyterian nodded.

The old Devil didn't see the jerk or the nod, but he heard the words. Now that's a pity, he thought. I thought I could do more damage than just make them late for services. Maybe once they get out ahead of me, I can start up and run into one, just enough to make him holler at the other for not putting the brake on.

But the two men didn't get out in front of the Model T. Instead, they stood on either side of it and laid their hands on the hood. The old Devil felt a cold shiver along his back, which was by no means a normal thing for him.

"Lord above," one of the men called, "Thou knowest how many of Thy followers are depending on us this morning. So if there is something in this engine working against us, please let it be made to work for us."

And now that old Devil felt something take hold of him that wasn't a shiver. His feet started to go up and down, and his hands started pushing on the bits of the engine.

"Amen!" shouted the Presbyterian minister, jumping onto the running board. "Catch hold, Walt!"

The two men leaped into the front seat just in time. That Model T shot off down that dirt road fast enough to spin dirt into a bird's nest in a tree ten feet back from the ditch. It ran so fast because the old Devil made it run that way, but this wasn't the Devil's idea. He worked up a sweat and then he worked harder, because the driver didn't bother to shift gears when they came to a hill. Going down the other side, that old Devil went so fast he was sure they'd all be smashed at the bottom.

The preachers pulled into Busta early for services. The Devil found himself parked outside the Lutheran church, where he had to listen to the singing and the sermon. It hurt his ears, but he couldn't seem to let go of the engine.

On the church steps after the service, a small, round lady shook her head and wrung her hands. "I'm sorry, pastor," she said. "I meant to have a hot dinner ready, but the fire went out in the stove and I didn't know whether it was a sin to get the boys to build a new one."

"I don't believe there's much of a problem, Mrs. Lundermann," the minister told her. "Just bring the food out this way."

He cranked up the Model T and went around to push the gas pedal down. That old Devil found himself working harder than before, just sitting there outside the Lutheran church. Soon the hood of the car was hot enough to cook everything Mrs. Lundermann brought. Cooking enough to feed a congregation of Lutherans is no small task, as the Devil found out.

"Thought this was supposed to be a day of rest," he panted as everyone ate.

He had little enough time for that, since the Presbyterian pastor turned up during dessert. The two men were in the front seat again in no time, urging the Model T over the low hills to West Wick. Here the devil found himself parked outside the Presbyterian church, so at least he got to hear a different sermon. It didn't cheer him much.

"Well, Martin," said the Lutheran minister when services had finished, "now what?"

The Presbyterian sort of winked at him and said, "Since we seem to be making such good time today, I wondered if we couldn't drive up to St. Jerome so I can see how old Mrs. Turner is doing."

But that old Devil had had enough. He banged his head against the inside of the hood until he bounced it open.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" he cried, twisting around to see them. "You've done your work and had your fun, but St. Jerome's sixty miles from here, and it's all hills. Isn't it time we just admit that you win so I can go home?"

"Well, Walt," said the Presbyterian. "What do you say?"

"Kind of a pity, just when she's running so smooth," the Lutheran replied, running a hand over his chin. "But I suppose it wouldn't be right for us to depend on the Devil's help."

"Off with you then," the Presbyterian told the Devil. "You know the direction."

The Devil pulled his hands and feet free of the engine and climbed out. His back hurt and his knees hurt, and he had the worst headache he could recall since he'd been dropped out of Heaven. So he had to sit down on the fender for a second to collect himself before trying to fly home.

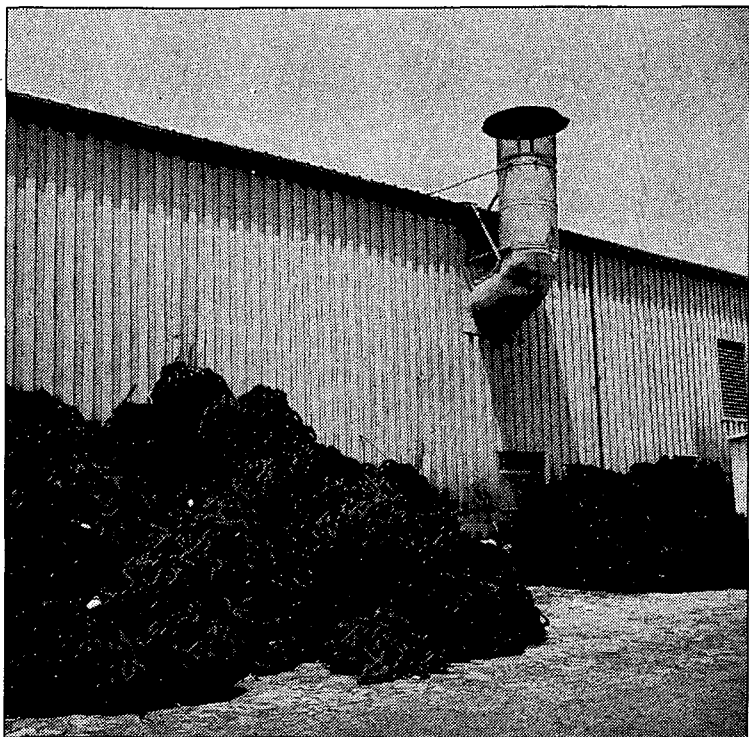
"Just tell me this, gentlemen," he said when he had his breath back, "how did you know I was in there?"

"Well now," said the Lutheran pastor, "it wasn't so very difficult. There couldn't be but one power that would make a Model T more contrary than it usually is."

The old Devil nodded and hopped down off the fender. As he took a turn around the front of the Model T, the horn went off with a blast that made him jump six feet in the air. As long as he was there, he just kept going.

My my my, he said to himself as he flew out of Iowa by the shortest route. If folks are going to live with tin devils of their own make, I'll be out of a job in no time.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

What got away? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "March Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

The Clammer

D. A. McGuire

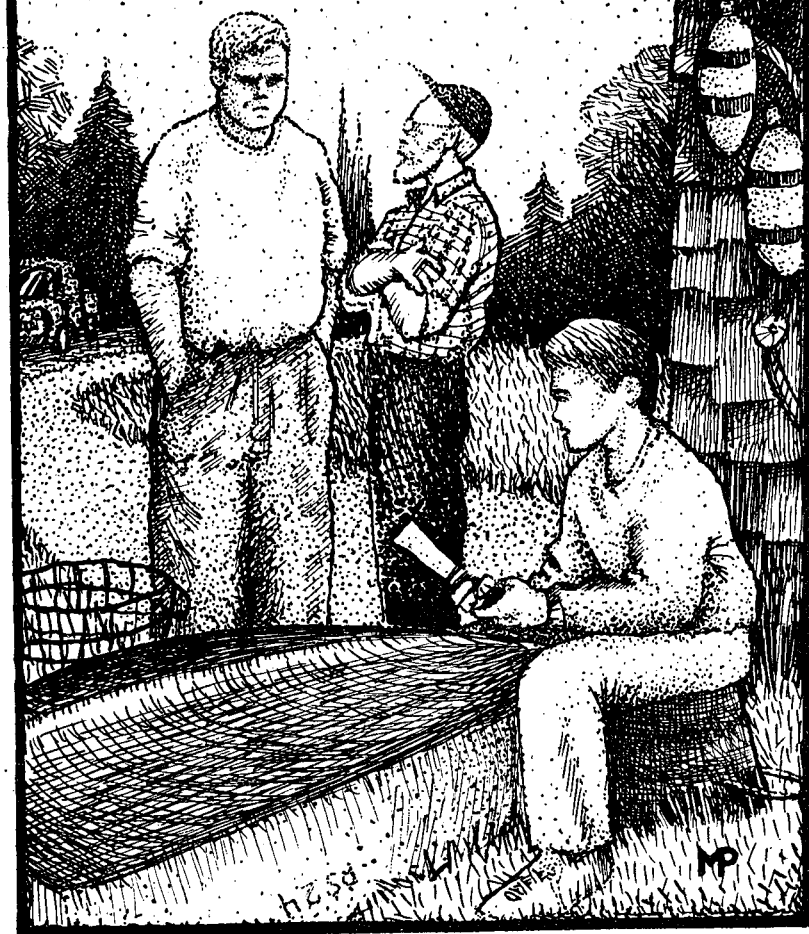


Illustration by Mark Penta

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/96

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You could see it first in his eyes; he had really exceptional eyes. Now this might seem strange coming from a thirteen-year-old kid—what would I notice about another guy's eyes? But that's just the point; Joe McClarey's eyes were so *exceptional* (my mother's description) that you couldn't help but notice them.

They were so blue they were almost indigo, so blue they didn't look real. But Joe wouldn't have gone in for those colored contact lenses; he wouldn't have had the money or the interest. Besides, no lenses can create the wonder, curiosity, and touch of childlike innocence in Joe McClarey's eyes.

Except that today something else was there, and in the expression on his face. Joe had a large face. It reminded me of one a sculptor might have cut raw from stone and then never bothered to finish. Despite that, it was a pleasant face, always smiling. Not today.

I suppose someone might wonder how I could tell so much from just looking at a man. It's really not hard to explain. I've seen a lot in my thirteen years; and I've learned to notice small things around me, including the expressions on people's faces. If they don't have a certain look I've come to expect as normal, I know something is wrong.

Something was definitely wrong with Joe McClarey. Mr. Hornton once described Joe as "one of those fellows who have so darn little in life it's a wonder they're always so darn happy."

But Mr. Hornton isn't a perfect judge of character. Some of the happiness in Joe was an act, always had been. That's what I was thinking as Joe came trudging up Mr. Hornton's gravel driveway.

"It's the third one closed on the point this week," Joe said as he dropped an empty wire basket at his feet. He had come to the United States from Ireland when he was ten; twenty-five years later he still retained most of the lyrical sound of the Irish. I liked to hear him talk.

"I've heard, Joe," Mr. Hornton said sympathetically.

"Be damned if I can see how to make the rent this week, Elmer, so if you've a piece of work for me, I'd not be too proud to say yes to you, I wouldn't."

Joe was well over six feet tall, and I've noticed humility's always harder for a big man than it is for a smaller one. In spite of that, he didn't look pitiable, or even desperate; he just looked worried. He had plenty to worry about.

They had been closing clam beds up and down the point all week, and throughout this end of Cape Cod—Manamasset and

Manamesset Bay—since the start of summer. Contaminants in the water was the official story, though just what these contaminants were was unclear. Runoff from rainfall, fertilizer, sewage, these were all possibilities; even the notorious red tide was suspect, but whatever the reason, once the “Posted” signs went up over the tidal flats, they were off-limits to clammers.

And Joe McClarey was a clammer, or what people in the rest of the county probably called a clam-digger. Joe depended on the income, the fifty or sixty bucks a bushel that the common soft-shelled clam would bring him.

Soft-shelled clams. *Mya arenaria*. The tourists’ delicacy. The Cape Codder’s ordinary supertime fare. Of course, Joe also took mussels and quahogs, oysters, too, but if you’d asked him to list his occupation, to declare what he took the most pride in doing, he’d tell you he was a clammer and that at one time he’d traveled the length and breadth of the upper East Coast plying his trade. But today Cape Cod, Massachusetts, was his home, and these days things were very different for Joe.

“Well, you know, Joe, if I had anything . . .” Mr. Hornton began; there was an apologetic sound to his voice. He wasn’t

making excuses. Mr. Hornton was as honest as the day was long (another one from my mother). A retired sign painter about seventy years old, Mr. Hornton was a friend of mine. Maybe that sounds strange, too, but I honestly liked and respected Elmer Hornton. I did small jobs for him, things Joe would hardly be interested in—cleaning paintbrushes, stripping wood, mixing paint—and today, removing varnish from the transom of a ten foot dinghy.

As I sat on an overturned bucket watching and listening to Joe and Mr. Hornton, I knew something more than closed clam beds was troubling Joe. He wasn’t asking for a handout, or even a loan (he would have taken neither), but he had a distant look to him, as though the sun had set behind his face and eyes, casting them in shadow.

For one thing—according to my mother, who knew Joe’s sister, Sheila McClarey—Joe had taken on too much too fast. Married less than a year, Joe had a young wife struggling with cancer and three small children to support. The children, a five-year-old girl and twin two-year-old boys, were his wife’s from a previous relationship. The truly amazing thing about Joe was that he had married this woman *knowing* she

was sick and knowing her prognosis might not be good. He had *willingly* taken on this burden, even to adopting her children, all because he loved the woman who had once been Annie Rafferty, his high school sweetheart.

I'd heard the story of Joe's proposal to Annie from my mother, who'd heard it from Sheila. It had happened at a popular local restaurant, Murphy's Lobster Trap, where Sheila worked as a waitress:

"So Joe walks over to Annie and says, 'You claim you'll be a burden to me? But what burden is that, Annie my love? I've the sea and the sand and the fisherman's blood in me, that I do, but when I go home at night I go home to an empty house. So I'm a sad man, Annie Rafferty, and a lonely man, but if you would have me, then a happier and a prouder man I could never be.'"

Annie had been stricken speechless, her eyes filling up with tears as great Joe McClarey, the clammer, in his worn, mud-stained jeans and old torn sweatshirt, went down on one knee in the crowded bar at the Lobster Trap and finished with: "And I'll be a father to your little ones and a husband to you, if only you'll have me, my sweet, sweet Annie."

Annie had burst into tears, the bar into applause, and Joe

embraced the woman for whom he'd given away his freedom.

Or so Sheila said. My mother claimed it was the most romantic story she'd ever heard.

And what woman could have refused Joe? Especially a sick woman like Annie, deserted by the father of her children and forced to live on welfare?

So it was all of that, and more, that Mr. Hornton was confronting in his driveway. Joe, the man who'd taken on too much, was also a man who depended on the whims and vagaries of nature—the tides and the changing character of the clam flats. He got along between times by doing odd jobs—carpentry and fishing and maybe a bit of machinist work. Unfortunately, Joe was also the kind of man who could never stay in a nine-to-five job if he heard a new clam bed was opening up.

More than once Mr. Hornton had helped him find a good job, with insurance and health benefits, only to learn that after a week or two he had walked off the job because he'd heard a particular spit or mudflat was revealing perfect, two-inch, soft-shelled clams by the bushel.

"Makes me look a fool," I heard Mr. Hornton tell my mother. "I speak well of him, get him a good position over at Conrad's Machine Shop, and what does he go and do? Works three

weeks and then just up and takes off. To dig clams. At eighty cents a pound. How can a man survive like that?"

How *could* a man survive like that? A single man, maybe. But not a man with a sick wife. Annie was in the hospital now, and there was talk of moving her to Northport County Hospice. The three children were staying with Joe's sister over in Pocasset.

"I don't know what to tell you, Joe." Mr. Hornton glanced at me, and I resumed scraping away at the layer of softened varnish on the dinghy. "It's a damned shame, it is. I heard they closed Slippery Point, and all of South Manamesset, too."

Joe nodded, acknowledging me with a turn of his indigo-blue eyes. "Shame is what it is, Elmer. These new people who buy along the water, do they know what they're doing? They have a glorious view, for sure, but don't they know the chemicals they put on their lovely green lawns poison the flats? They say they love the water, even as they're destroying it. That I cannot understand; how can anyone destroy the thing they love?"

"There'll always be people like that," Mr. Hornton agreed sadly. "People who don't know any better."

"But how can a man hurt what he loves? *That* I'll never

understand. Ah, but if you do hear of work, will you keep me in mind? I'm still at my place in West Harbor but may be moving in with Sheila if things . . ." He broke off and sighed.

Perhaps Joe understood. Perhaps he realized he'd let Mr. Hornton down once too often. Still, that didn't seem to be the reason for the strange cast in Joe's eyes. Maybe he was thinking of Annie, or the children.

With a parting nod, he picked up the empty basket and turned away. His black Chevy pickup was parked up the road next to a wooded lot. That was like Joe, too, not one to intrude or impose, but only politely inquire about work. On the other hand, though Joe was proud, I knew he was also reckless sometimes, and those two don't always go together, especially when others' welfare is at stake.

Even a kid like me knew that.

I watched him walk off, his long-legged stride looking tired and cramped. I'd heard he was starting to feel the pressure. My mother said Annie's condition was deteriorating swiftly.

I set aside the paint scrapers, brushed dried paint chips off my jeans, and followed Mr. Hornton into the garage he used as a combination workshop and storage shed. We stepped around an overturned rowboat, a pair of broken saw-

horses, two wooden lobster traps, and some buoys he was planning to "paint up" for a buddy. Against the far window was a workbench littered with tools, coffee cans holding mixtures of paint and turpentine, and an assortment of clean and dirty paintbrushes.

"How's school? Haven't said much about it," Mr. Hornton said.

"It's okay," I lied. I'd just started eighth grade and wasn't liking it much; neither was I in the mood to talk about it.

"Teachers okay?"

"Yeah, listen, I've got to say this—"

"Who've you got for science? Filiades? They say she's one tough bugger but you can learn a lot from her. Did a little business with her father back in the sixties, a great fellow, owned a tavern over in—" He was flipping through a pile of paint-spattered business cards as he spoke.

"Yeah, I got her. She's okay. Gives too much homework." I didn't want to be distracted. "Look, Mr. Hornton, I was thinking about the estate—"

He turned to me, paint swatches in his hand now, his eyes frowning around the corners. He was going over to a friend's house to confer about a job. Mr. Hornton might have been officially retired, but he

still did occasional boat work, and he had a wealthy friend who wanted him to paint his sloop. The friend wanted it painted "beige, cream beige," so Mr. Hornton was going to show him the various shades "beige" came in.

Actually, no matter which swatch the friend chose, Mr. Hornton already had the paint picked out. Cream beige, sunny beige, sand beige, honey beige, they all came out of the same paint can. But I guess most people don't know that, or even care. They buy the name, Mr. Hornton says, not the color.

"The estate?" He frowned. "I thought that was going no further than you and me."

"Yeah, but Joe—" I stopped short. How did I say this? That Joe needed the clams from the new bed Mr. Hornton and I had found worse than we did? The facts were these:

Mr. Hornton had been hired as a temporary caretaker for a vast oceanside estate located out on Manamesset Point, which gave us access to a huge, meandering shoreline that most people ignored, didn't know about, or couldn't get to easily, even by boat. One day in late August when we'd been checking on the house—a magnificent house with towers at either end and a beautiful red clay tile roof—we'd decided to try a little digging

just for the heck of it. What we had found in the dark sand at low tide had been astonishing—a clam bed that would keep us supplied for months, years maybe, if no one else discovered them. The clams were small, succulent, perfect two and three inchers in their eating prime. Every now and then we would go out and dig a mess of clams for ourselves or my mother, who despite the fact she wasn't a native Cape Codder had learned to like some of the finer gustatory delights of the region, like steamed clams, fried clams, and, Mr. Hornton's specialty, cheese-and-clam casserole.

"Heck," Mr. Hornton muttered, reaching over the workbench to a set of keys on a hook. "And damn. Okay, but you swear Joe to secrecy, Herbie boy. You tell Joe only him and you and me know about that place. He's not to tell anyone else. Chances are, more than us know about it anyhow. I think I saw Dickie Hauser out there the other day, on his boat. I pretended I was just picking up trash, checking on the house, but Dickie's a smart son-of-a-gun. So you just impress on Joe that the area's clean, it's never been posted, and if word gets around, that whole flat will be wiped out in a few weeks."

He handed me the key ring—two keys, one to the metal gate

at the street that blocked off the dirt road leading out to the estate, and one to the great house known as Salvage Hill. Then he leaned over the workbench and wiped a spot clean in the paint-speckled window with his hand.

"Joe hasn't gone yet. He's talking to Mildred Potter, and what's that woman doing? Giving him a whole basket of squash! Darn her, she hasn't given *me* any squash! And didn't I just take her a whole bag of tomatoes last—"

"I'll see you later," I called, already at the door.

Behind me I heard him say, "I'll phone your mother and tell her where you are, then I'll come out myself in a little while. Leave the gate open."

"So this is all private property, is it?" Joe asked, blue eyes flicking to the left and right as we traveled down the dirt road to Salvage Hill, the home of the late Esther Hadrinham. Mr. Hornton had known Miss Hadrinham, had been named in her will as temporary custodian of her private library, and had been hired by her heirs to look after the place until they decided what to do with the property.

One rumor had it that a private group wanted to buy Salvage Hill and turn it into a ho-

tel. Another rumor said a wealthy Swiss banker was eyeing it as a summer house for his family. But whatever became of the estate, right now it was more than a hundred acres of wooded land, curving shorelines, and a huge, imposing house at the end of a narrow, unpaved road.

Joe had said little as we drove along, but there was wonder in his eyes, and questions, too, and when we came to the end of the road, where we could hear water slapping the beach, seagulls screeching, and motorboats purring in the cove, he was staring straight ahead.

"Pretty house, pretty house, rising from the sea, slicing purple sunsets with unnecessary ease."

I turned, surprised. Joe looked mesmerized. He was staring at the house, at its twin towers to east and west. He looked at me and smiled.

"You . . . make that up?" I asked.

"That I did, a little poem for a pretty lady with a simple smile. Suppose 'tis the Irish in me."

"The Irish *in* you?"

"I'm not a full-blooded Irishman, Herbie. My mother was a Scottish lassie. But as for me dad, he was as Irish as the Blarney stone, and he gave me the gift of words. When I saw the house, I knew I'd seen it before,

from over yonder beyond the island. I've done a bit of clamming and oystering over on Parson's Point near the old wharf and the marina. That's where I've seen it before; the towers rising over Salvage Island."

"Yeah," I agreed, trying to imagine the point of view from south and east of there, beyond Salvage Island, which lay a hundred yards or so off the beach below. A causeway had once connected this point of land to the island, but after a hurricane broke it up, it hadn't been rebuilt. Across the cove, known locally as Little Icy Bay, was the East Manamesset Marina and, slightly farther south, what was called the Old Wharf. From either vantage point the house with the twin towers probably did look kind of pretty.

"I guess from Parson's Point all you can see are the towers," I agreed.

"Shimmering rockets against the blue," he murmured, still caught in his poetry. "At sunset they make a pretty contrast against the sky." He stirred, shaking off the strangeness of the moment like a dog shakes off water. "But I don't think there'll be clams round here, Herbie. Too rocky." He had turned his attention from the magnificent house to the beach below the seawall. It was still low tide, and there was plenty of

time to dig some clams if we got started now.

"We found a place, Mr. Horn-ton and me. Really."

"Well then, show me the place if you will, and I'll thank you kindly and so will my little ones." With that he grinned and clapped me on the shoulder and we were off.

I've gone clamming many a time with Mr. Horn-ton and once or twice with Jake Valari, my mother's friend, but never with anyone who had so much . . . well, I don't know what word to use. I want to say love, but that doesn't sound right. I don't think you can really *love* clamming, so maybe the word I want is passion. Yes, passion. I've seen it before in men and even in some women when they're doing something they truly care about, something that drives them like nothing else in their lives.

I've seen passion in Mr. Horn-ton when he's painting at his easel. He may have been a sign painter all his life, but what he really cares about and what takes him out of this world and into another (as he puts it) is still-life painting. Give him an easel, a basket of fruit, and an old table to set it on, and he loses all concept of time. He's told me an hour, two, three can go by and it will seem like minutes to him.

For Jake, who's a cop and one heck of a wonderful guy, his passion is target shooting. Jake was a crack army sharpshooter, and even though he's just a regular cop—or actually a detective sergeant on Manamesset's small police force—he likes nothing better than to be out on the shooting range. I've heard him say he becomes so engrossed in what he's doing that the rest of the world "just dissolves away." That's how he puts it: everything just dissolves away.

I don't know what my mother's passion is, or maybe I do and just hate to admit it. Hers was my dad, and when my dad died ten years ago, her passion died with him.

Anyhow, I don't think I have a passion. Except maybe for reading. Sometimes I can get so deep into a book I barely know the time is passing. I'll look at the clock and be amazed it's past midnight; it'll seem like I just opened the book five minutes ago.

As for Joe McClarey, there was suddenly no doubt that this was his passion: freeing the soft, dark sand with one clean swipe of his digger, an ancient, curved fork with five tines each a good twelve inches long. It made Freddy Kreuger's hand look like a pussycat's paw. After loosening the sand, he pushed

his hands down into it and pulled up, cupping his hands as he did so. Between his fingers the soft, wet sand slipped away, leaving in his palms six, seven, sometimes as many as eight clams.

Elated, he looked at me with near disbelief. This was a new bed, a beautiful new clam bed in which almost every clam was a perfect two to two and a half inches.

"Heaven," he whispered as he rinsed a handful of clams and laid them in the bottom of the wire basket. And after we had dug awhile, he added, "These will make Buddy Shepard sit up and take notice."

"You sell to Mr. Shepard?" I asked. "The guy who owns the marina?"

"I know what they say about him, Herbie." The tide was sweeping in closer now, erasing the flat from sight not twenty feet from us. We had dug nearly two bushels' worth, and it seemed Joe would have to be satisfied with that.

"Mr. Hornton won't do work for him. Mr. Shepard stiffed him on a sign deal a long time ago," I said. "He says if it weren't for out-of-staters, Mr. Shepard's business would have dried up years ago. He undercut the other boatyards and marinas around here, and when they went bankrupt, he raised his

prices. Mr. Corcoran, when his boatyard went out of business, he drank himself to death, or so people say."

Joe scooped up another handful of clams and rinsed them.

"And he pays his help—and those who sell him fish for his restaurant—" I stopped short, aware I was about to say a vulgar word. I'd been raised to be careful with my language, but sometimes it was hard to do. The truth was, every local this side of the canal knew that Brian "Buddy" Shepard, owner of the East Manamesset Marina and the Rail Car restaurant, was a real son-of-a-...

"But he buys everything I take him, Herbie. Took him eel once, and the man paid me for it. Learned later, I did, that he had to give it away, had some fellows cut it up for fishbait. Now, some may look on eel as a delicacy, true, but in these parts it's considered worse than catfood, just like cod used to be. But that's beside the point. I go to Mr. Buddy Shepard because I know he'll always be taking my catch, no matter what I have."

I looked at the first wire basket, full to the top with dull white clams, their opercula glistening, fat, soft, nearly translucent. They were going to make fine eating, and no matter what Buddy Shepard paid Joe for

them, he was going to get a good deal.

"You ought to get top dollar for these," I told him, picking one up and flipping it in the air. "These are perfect, Joe, damn near perfect."

He smiled and with a wet hand tousled my hair. "You are your mother's boy, Herbert. You've got her smile."

It was then that we heard the sound of a horn from the bluff above. Mr. Hornton had driven his truck nearly to the seawall's edge and was waving down at us.

It was time to go.

I've got to say this: I hated eighth grade.

And I really disliked most of my new teachers, especially my homeroom teacher, who was also my science teacher, Mrs. Filiades, Mrs. *Thalassa* Filiades. And she didn't like me, not one little bit. How did I know this? Because she was giving me such a hard time about my emergency health card. So I was a few days late handing it in? So when I did hand it in, my mother hadn't signed it? Didn't she know my mother worked in the school superintendent's office? And if I got sick or brained out on the playing field, the first thing anyone would do was call her at the super's office, right? So what was the big deal?

Except when I said to Mrs. Filiades, "Why can't I just sign it for her?" the poor lady took a fit, an absolute mental, as they used to say back in the eighties.

"You sign it? Why, Herbert Sawyer, I can hardly believe you'd say that. Don't you know that's *forgery*?" She emphasized that last word like it was a crime, for crying out loud.

I suppose the smart thing would have been to shut up, jam the card back in my school bag, and say, "Okay, I'll get it to you tomorrow," but no, I had to go and say this: "Why can't I sign it? My mother's always signing stuff for me."

I mean, didn't I have a point? I've seen my mother sign cards, papers, and forms all in my name. She got an insurance check once—made out to me—and she signed it, and I didn't see one penny of that money. I love my mother, sure, but if she can do *that*, why can't I sign *her* name, especially in a case where there's no money involved?

"Herbert Sawyer, Jr., you get that card properly signed by tomorrow or I'll be giving your mother a call. Do you understand?"

I'm not known as a wise guy, neither am I what teachers like to call a discipline problem, but how's a guy supposed to react when he's threatened?

Like this: "Go ahead and call her if you want. She works at the superintendent's office. Do you want the number?"

Now, I figure most teachers would have been intimidated by that, though it's not really why I said it. I just think any normal teacher would have backed off with something like, "Oh, that's all right, Herbert, you just get that signed and we won't have to bother your mother at work." I mean, isn't the superintendent the boss of all the teachers or something?

But no, this Mrs. Filiades didn't scare easily. She said, "I think I'll do just that, Herbert, next period, which I have free. I don't need the number, thank you, because I already know it."

I have to admit that kind of surprised me. The rest of the day, in between a succession of classes that ran from bad to worse, I worried about it. I was late to math, got yelled at. In English I'd forgotten my homework, was reminded that "this is an Honors English class and we have certain *standards*." In gym I had to play coed volleyball with a bunch of nearsighted kids. If it hadn't been for me and this one new kid, a tall girl named Meggie Charleton, we would have been creamed worse than we were. When I finally got to the last period, Spanish, the teacher gave us a pop quiz.

I absolutely hated eighth grade. Despised it. Abhorred it. Abominated it. (I had a new thesaurus, and the English teacher was "encouraging" us to use it.) I couldn't wait to get out of the place, maybe do some more clamming with Joe. Low tide was at five twenty-five that afternoon, and I'd told him I'd meet him at Mr. Hornton's if he wanted to go out to Salvage Hill again.

But I had to stop off at home first to see if Mrs. Filiades had really called my mother.

Usually my mother is at home when I get there. With her new job we have the same hours: eight to two. Mom's just a clerk, but she fills in when the superintendent's secretary is sick. Today she was home, talking on the phone. The minute I walked in I knew something was up. She turned away from me, her hand covering the mouthpiece as though that would keep me from hearing her.

I swear to God some days all women—my mother, Mrs. Filiades—are just alike. *Stupid*.

I really don't mean that the way it sounds. Maybe I could rephrase it; maybe they think I'm stupid, and that's one thing I definitely am *not*.

Just the same, I was hoping she wouldn't be home yet, that I could grab some cookies and a can of soda and fly off down the

road to Mr. Hornton's. I knew how my mother would react if Mrs. Filiades called, with sad, dark eyes, a wan expression. This was how my mother tormented me. She didn't yell, what she did instead was lay a guilt trip on me, starting with, "I got a call from your homeroom teacher, Herbert . . ."

But no, this was what I heard instead: "Yes, Herbie was with him yesterday. I know, Jake. No, he hasn't heard."

Her voice was different. For a moment I couldn't put my finger on it, and then in a flash, with my hand on the refrigerator door, I pinpointed it. She was frightened. I spun around.

"Mom! Is anything wrong? Has anything happened to Mr. Hornton?"

In that split second I felt my chest empty, my heart leap into my throat. The look on her face, the fear in her eyes, even the pallor of her skin—she had absolutely no color to her—all pointed in one direction. Something had happened to my friend, Mr. Hornton.

"No, Herbie, Elmer Hornton is fine." She put her hand over the mouthpiece, her sad, scared eyes meeting mine. Then back into the phone she said, "Yes, he's here. No, how could *he* know anything about this?" There was a pause, one in which her expression went from fright-

ened to truly agonized. I wanted to wrench the phone from her hand, demand she tell me what was going on, but then her dismal, dark eyes looked at me.

"Herbie, Joe McClarey was arrested this morning. Buddy Shepard was found with one of Joe's clamping forks stabbed through his throat. Out at the marina, at the Rail Car. His wife found him when she went to open up for breakfast. They think . . . oh my God . . ." She had to pause.

Something I made careful note of, even in my shock, amazement, and disbelief . . .

That my mother had to pause to wipe her eyes as she finished: "The police think Joe's responsible . . . that Joe killed Mr. Shepard sometime last night."

I sat on our side porch steps watching the clouds roll in, the night move down on us in shades of lavender and blue, and as it did, I tried to imagine what Salvage Hill would look like from the water, from Salvage Island, or from across the cove, from Parson's Point where Buddy Shepard's marina and restaurant, the Rail Car, were located. Would the clay tile roofs of the twin towers look like they were "slicing the purple sunset with unnecessary ease"?

And what was Joe thinking,

and what was Joe doing, locked up in jail for something he almost certainly couldn't have done?

Behind me in the house I could hear the low murmur of the nightly news and my mother's voice as she talked at the kitchen table with Jake Valari.

Jake, who earlier had greeted me at the door with: "Don't you say a word, boy. You've got no stake in this one. You hear me?"

Jake's eyes had been hard and dark; he'd surprised me. But possibly my response surprised him more. "I know that, Jake." I deliberately kept my voice low; Mom was inside glued to the local cable news station.

"I mean it, Herbie," Jake added. "I know you were with Joe yesterday. I already know Joe's whereabouts for the last twenty-four hours, but it's got . . . *he's* got nothing to do with you, not unless . . ." I saw the beginning of an uncertain frown on his face.

"Not unless he said anything to me that might be important, right? That might be *relevant*?"

Jake had sucked in a deep breath and waited a moment, but Mom hadn't heard his car, neither had she heard our voices. Dropping his, he said, "Hell, *is* there anything relevant you can tell me? Did Joe . . . damn . . . did Joe say anything to you yesterday that might even re-

motely have anything to do with this?"

I'd studied him before I answered, thinking back to other instances when fate, chance, or just unlucky coincidence had done this to Jake and me, to times when I had been in the wrong place at the right time, or when I had seen something I shouldn't have, or known something others hadn't, but oddly enough, this didn't seem to be one of those times.

"No. He didn't say anything about wanting to kill Mr. Shepard, or hating him, if that's what you mean," I said. We could hear my mother moving around inside. She'd been distracted and nervous since Jake's call a few hours ago, and I hadn't been surprised when she said Jake would stop by for a few minutes.

I had assumed this was why, to talk to me, to get my perspective on things. I'd been flattered he thought so highly of me, but hadn't I helped him out before? And wasn't that why he'd driven out here, his red Firebird parked in our driveway? He'd come out, interrupting other serious, investigative business, just to see me . . .

Boy, had I been wrong. Because with a grimly satisfied grunt he'd pushed past me, grabbed hold of the door, gone inside. And there I was, left on the steps in the dark—alone.

"Oh, Jake!" That had been my mother from inside, followed by silence.

Silence?

I'd gone in, too, found him and my mother in some kind of strange embrace in the center of the kitchen, she with her head on his broad arm. She wasn't crying and he wasn't saying anything, but when his blue eyes lifted over her head to meet mine, I figured the best thing for me to do would be to leave.

So I did.

Joe McClarey carved his initials into all his clam-diggers. The initials were unmistakable. And on the clam-digger found sticking out of Buddy Shepard's neck—thrust from back to front, according to the cable news reporter—were the letters *J.H.M.*

Joseph Henry McClarey.

I sat in the dark of my bedroom watching the news report for the fourth or fifth time. I didn't have a cable hookup in there, but I did have a little VCR Jake had given me. It didn't record but it played tapes, and I had taped the news from the living room TV. It was nearly midnight; Jake had left hours ago. For the fifth time I hit the rewind button, waited, then hit play.

This time I sat on the edge of my bed and watched the red-haired woman newscaster as

she gave the "shocking report" one more time.

"We have a shocking report this evening. Local restaurant owner Brian Shepard, known in the Manamesset community as Buddy, was found murdered this morning in his business office behind his restaurant. Shepard's wife found the body as she was opening up the Rail Car, a popular eating place here at the East Manamesset Marina, which was owned by Buddy Shepard and his ex-wife Linda. Apparently Mrs. Shepard found her husband lying on the floor of the office with the tines of a clamming digger similar to this one—" here she holds up a digger something like the one Joe used, except the tines were straight, not curved—"piercing his neck from back to front. Police will release very few details at this time, but an arrest has been made. According to reliable sources, a local clam fisherman named Joe McClarey was arrested late this morning and is a suspect in the murder. The digger that killed Buddy Shepard is believed to have belonged to McClarey, and was identified by the initials *J.H.M.* carved on the handle. The crime has stunned this small marina community and the town of Manamesset, which unfortunately has had more than its share of shocking murders over the last

two years. With me now is Mr. Porgy Battocks—”

“Rattocks.” Rattocks, the manager of the East Manamesset Marina interrupted the red-haired reporter to correct the pronunciation of his name. Far as I was concerned, Battocks or Rattocks, it was a crummy name.

“Sorry,” she said. “Mr. Rattocks, can you tell our viewers what kind of man Buddy Shepard was? He seems to have been a well-liked and highly respected member of this community. This must seem like such a shocking and senseless act to you.”

“It sure as hell does, and I hope they put that clammer away for good,” Porgy Rattocks started in while the reporter nodded sympathetically, her microphone jammed under Porgy’s beefy jowls.

I suppose I should put a little of this in perspective: Porgy Rattocks was a problem drinker who worked for next to nothing because he couldn’t get anything better anywhere and knew it. Buddy Shepard paid Porgy a pittance but let him eat at the Rail Car free and drive his new powerboat, a white Formula 336 with a red racing stripe, around the bay, annoying the boaters who were forced to pay Buddy’s outrageous fees. But the boat owners had no alternative if

they wanted to moor in Little Icy Bay; Buddy had long ago driven all the other marinas out of business.

“Buddy was a damn nice guy, a damn nice guy,” Porgy was rattling on as he pulled a dirty handkerchief from a pocket and sniffled into it. “Hell, excuse me, but Buddy, he gave me a break when no one else did. He brought this whole area back, brought in the boaters and the tourists and helped the local fishing industry. The man was a saint in my eyes, and in a lot of other people’s, too.” Now Porgy was dabbing at his eyes with the dirty cloth. I froze the picture.

Behind him and the redhaired reporter (to whom I was planning to send my thesaurus so she could find some synonyms for “shocking”) was Buddy Shepard’s business office surrounded by yellow police tape. This was where Buddy had been found facedown behind his desk, the digger protruding from the back of his neck.

Which in my opinion was a pretty stupid way to do it. Stab a guy through the neck and then just leave the murder weapon there?

The reporter didn’t give any more details, like if there was blood on the desk or chair. Or signs of a struggle. How about breaking and entering? Or if it appeared that Buddy knew his

killer. (Would you turn your back on a stranger coming at you with a clamping fork?) And this was for two reasons—the reporter hadn't been allowed close enough to observe any of this herself, and she was simply lousy at her job.

She did say that Mrs. Shepard had run into the Rail Car, located across an unpaved parking lot from the business office, and gotten Benny Grammet. Grammet was the bartender. He had been in this morning to help with the daily accounts. It was Grammet who called 911, notified the police.

Then Grammet had gone into the business office, taken a quick look around, and come out, closing the door behind him.

A bad move, in my opinion. He should have waited for the police to arrive, who in this case happened to be Jake Valari, in charge of the investigation now until such time as a higher authority decided to transfer the case to someone else.

So all I had to go on was a dead body, which I hadn't seen, with Joe's digger sticking out of the back of his neck, a body found behind a desk . . .

Facing which way? Toward the window behind the desk? I knew there was a window there; I'd been down to the marina enough times to notice it. The business office was located in

part of an old boat hangar. In it Buddy did all the paperwork associated with running the marina and the couple of small shops he owned there. The Rail Car restaurant was operated by Linda Mae Shepard, Buddy Shepard's ex, and she did her paperwork in the Rail Car's office, just behind the bar. That's where she'd supposedly been going, to tidy up some accounts, make out some orders, and pay some bills while waiting for Grammet to come help her open for breakfast.

But where had Joe gone last evening after leaving me? Did he see Mrs. Shepard or Mr. Buddy Shepard? To whom did he sell his clams? What time did he arrive and leave? Who saw him come, and then go?

I put the tape back on play and watched as the reporter jammed the microphone under the chin of a tall, nondescript man in his mid-thirties with dirty blond hair. This was the part that drove me crazy. This woman had an eyewitness to the crime scene, and she didn't ask a single pertinent question.

"Mr. Grammet, you knew the late Buddy Shepard. What kind of man was he?"

Porgy had launched into Buddy Shepard's wonderfulness on every count, but Benny Grammet did not. There was a pause, maybe a tenth of a second, but

you could almost see this man's mind working: I'm on TV and this stupid reporter is asking me for a statement so I'd better say the right thing or I'm going to come across looking just as stupid as she does.

"Mr. Shepard was a very fair man. Very fair," he said, nodding for emphasis. "I know Buddy had disagreements with some of the local suppliers, and some of them can get very coarse, very loud, but I never thought any of them would do something like this."

"What are you referring to, Mr. Grammet? Local suppliers? Do you mean of shellfish and fish? Are you alluding to Joe McClarey, currently in custody for the murder of Buddy Shepard?"

Mr. Grammet raised his hands dramatically, an affected look of horror on his long, thin face. "I'm not alluding to anything at all. I certainly can't believe Joe McClarey did this. I've known Joe for years. I'm just saying that some of the local clammers didn't get along with Buddy. I prefer to believe it was someone who was going to rob him and didn't expect to find him working so late. At least that's what I hope it turns out to be. I can't believe that anyone who knew Buddy could do this to him."

"It's a shame, a damn shame,"

Porgy Rattocks put in, shoving his head up to the mike again.

At that point the reporter started to talk to various other people who'd been at the Rail Car Wednesday night: a waitress, a cook, some of the customers. There'd been nothing important there, so I decided to rewind, put it to bed for the night. That's when there was a soft knock on my door.

"Come in," I said.

"But there's no way I can stay this afternoon," I told Mrs. Filades, "I have something I have to do."

"You knew that card was due today. I spoke with your mother yesterday. Did she tell you I called?"

How did I tell this woman that some people had more important things to worry about than signing their son's stupid health card? Or that after I had said come in last night, my mother had crept into my room like a ghost, settling into my desk chair, sighing as she did so.

Mom had changed in the last few months. A new job, a new car, this rented house, and working a regular job with good benefits had made a drastic improvement in her. In the past she had fretted over every bill, about where we'd be living from

winter to spring. We had gone through years of living in other people's summer houses in the winter, then looking for cheap lodgings while she worked as a chambermaid in the summer.

But that was in the past, along with all the fears and insecurities of that kind of life . . . or so I'd thought. Because I was shocked to see that old person return, sitting there shivering at my desk.

"Mom?"

She was in her nightgown, an old ratty bathrobe over it, a bathrobe I wished she'd throw away. But when she was sick or scared or depressed, she dragged it out.

"Herbie . . ." She thumped her fingers nervously on my desk. "Herbie, about Joe . . ." She looked at the blank screen of my TV set. "Herbie, about those other times when you've been able to figure out . . ." She shook her head.

"Don't worry, Mom. I'm not getting mixed up in this. I'm just watching the newscast because I can't make sense of it." I shrugged nonchalantly. Besides, I was telling the truth: I knew nothing.

That was when my mother did the most unexpected thing she'd ever done in my life: she whispered, "But if you did know something, honey, you'd go and tell Jake, wouldn't you?"

I was stunned. Was this the same woman I'd terrified, upset, and worried to death over my previous exploits? Was this really *her*, saying this to *me*?

"Yeah, of course," I whispered back.

"Because Joe was . . ." She dropped her hands into her lap. "Joe was once very special to me, Herbie. A long time ago, after your father . . ."

Hadn't I said that my mother described Joe McClarey's eyes as "exceptional"? Well, when had she said that?

A very long time ago, that's when.

She rose, kissed the top of my head, whispered goodnight, then went out . . .

Leaving me with a hundred questions. How special had Joe McClarey once been to my mother? And had Joe ever written a poem for her?

So I suppose you might call me a man on a mission, so much so that all else faded in importance, especially my emergency health card. Unfortunately, Mrs. Filiades had an obsession about that stupid card.

"What do you mean you don't have it? I spoke to your mother—"

"Look, I promise I'll have it tomorrow," I heard myself saying, whining actually. But she would have none of it; she was

reaching for her metal canister full of after-school detention slips.

"I'll see you tonight, Herbert," Mrs. Filiades said, starting to fill out the slip.

"But I can't stay!" I blurted out. "I have an appointment!"

"An appointment with whom?" she asked pointedly, writing away.

It was then that *she* walked through the door. I don't want to make it more dramatic than it was, but it was dramatic, just like it happens in detective novels: *she* walked in, and she just took over.

Meggie Charleton. The girl from my gym class. The cheerleader, the new girl, the natural blonde who stood almost a head higher than me, the girl who'd barely given me a look since moving into town a month ago, but the same girl who had acknowledged me after yesterday's volleyball game with "Nice job, Sawyer."

"With me, Mrs. Filiades. Didn't Herbert tell you?" Meggie said, strolling up to Mrs. Filiades' desk, her short skirt flipping against her legs. She swung her head, hair flying back as she took a quick look at me. "Herbert's agreed to tutor me every Friday after school. It's the only day of the week my mother doesn't work, so of course it's the only day he can

come over. My mother's a nurse, you know, and she said this would be the perfect time for him to give me some help. I really *do* need help in math. I don't seem to grasp math like I do science."

Meggie Charleton had just moved in, as I've said, but already she'd made quite an impression on everyone: teachers, coaches, and especially kids. She was my age, in fact I might have been older than her, but that doesn't make much difference when you're only thirteen and you look and act eighteen.

"Well, I suppose we can make an exception . . ." Mrs. Filiades was saying to Meggie and then to me. Her face said you'd better be thankful for this, Herbert Sawyer, Jr. "This one time. But if I don't see that card on Monday, I'll have to call your mother again and take this matter to the principal."

"Okay," I muttered. "Thanks." Meggie was already on her way to the door, her books tucked under her arm. She paused and turned to look at me.

No, to wait for me. Meggie Charleton was *waiting* for me.

I took a deep breath and went out with her. "You'd better walk with me until we get out of sight," she whispered, "or she'll think something's funny. If she calls my house this afternoon,

I'll pretend you're in the bathroom or something."

"Why did you do that?" I asked. Let me get one thing straight. I don't have a problem with girls; not like a lot of guys my age do. But I don't have much to do with them either. I suppose girls have their uses, but I hadn't found I needed a girl for anything . . . yet. Now here was a girl, a fabulously attractive girl, who just walks in and solves everything for me. Why?

"Felt like it," she said, her books tucked up to her chest as she looked me up and down. She wasn't that tall now that I came to notice, maybe only an inch or two taller than me. "And now you owe me, Sawyer. You owe me big."

"Oh, I get it." I understood all right. "What do you want? A week's worth of math homework? Social studies? Spanish? I'm pretty good at Spanish. Name your price."

Her mouth came open, a little in shock, a little in amusement, and then she laughed. "You've got to be kidding, Sawyer. You think that's what I want from you? Listen, I'll tell you what I want when the time comes. Got it?" She reached out and gave me a shove on the shoulder, and before I could react, speak, or even think, she turned and sauntered off down the corridor.

There were a few upperclass-

men in the corridor that afternoon, football players looking for their coach, who's a math teacher at my school. But when Meggie went by, they turned to watch her in silent awe. I heard one of them—I think he was a junior—say, "Damn!"

Damn is right. But quickly—and with some difficulty—I put Meggie Charleston out of my mind. Like I said, I had a mission. I didn't know what I could do for Joe, or my mother, or for anyone, but the very least I could do was try. So it was that I found myself out at the East Manamesset Marina, riding my bike down the dirt road that led from the parking lot to the Rail Car restaurant.

A handmade sign in the window said "Closed." I expected that. I parked my bike on a tiny patch of grass and walked around to the back of the restaurant. Two cars were parked there. The dumpster was overflowing with debris, attracting a chipmunk and four seagulls. They scattered at my approach.

The old boat hangar where Buddy Shepard's business office was was about fifty yards behind the restaurant. Yellow police tape blocked the doors and the front yard area, which was really just a tiny lawn with some cement blocks and a few

pots of petunias. A police car was out in front with a police officer in it I didn't immediately recognize. He was writing in a notebook on his lap.

I stood there a moment, just staring. It was about three o'clock that Friday afternoon, not much going on in the marina. A few people parking cars, a few walking to their boats, some stopping a moment to point at the business office. Some were carrying paper bags from take-out places. Since the Rail Car was closed, the people who lived on their boats had to go elsewhere for breakfast and lunch.

It was the middle of September, and though the marina wasn't shut down, only about a fourth of the summertime population was still there. Some people had returned to work; those who were retired had moved their boats farther south where it was warmer. As a result, the marina was very quiet. I saw a couple of men working on a boat engine some distance away, and then I heard a voice from the back door of the Rail Car. The door opened, and a middle-aged but fairly attractive blonde woman stepped out. She was holding a bag of lobster shells, and she looked at me, frowned, and turned to go back in. The dumpster was full; evidently she had no place to throw the shells. As

she started back inside, I headed in her direction.

"What do you want, kid? Didn't you see the sign out front? I'm closed, or haven't you heard?"

"Of course I've heard, ma'am," I said, putting on my politeness act. "And I'm really sorry about it, but I was wondering if you might have some work. A job, I mean. I can come back later if this is a bad time."

"Of course it's a bad time," she snapped irritably. "My husband got killed two nights ago, didn't he? Bastard got a clamming fork jabbed through his throat." She looked over at the cop, who had come to life when she appeared at the door. So he was watching not only the business office but her as well. Interesting.

"Sorry, ma'am. I'll come back." I stepped away.

"Wait a minute." She was looking at the cop, who was looking at both of us now. I hoped he didn't know me; I turned my back to him and pretended to shade my eyes from the sun, which was starting to sink in the southwest.

"Come on in, kid," she said suddenly. "What can it hurt?" And so I got into the Rail Car.

"You got your working papers? Your permit?" she asked. "Because you sure as hell don't look fourteen."

"Just turned fourteen," I said ingratiatingly.

"Well, fill this out, and I'll see what I have. A lot of my college help is gone for the winter, and I need some busboys, or I will if I ever get this place open again. Damn cops." She was looking out a side window toward the business office.

Of course I was lying. I wasn't fourteen and didn't have my work permit, but that didn't matter now as I sat filling out an application in the empty dining room of the long rail car that formed the original restaurant. This had once been a real dining car, had served food diner-style back in the 1950's. Then Buddy Shepard had come along, moved it out here to the marina, and added on a new dining room, a bigger kitchen, and a deck where people could sit and watch the boats in the bay while they stuffed themselves with fried clams, baked stuffed scrod, and mussels au gratin.

She picked up a wet cloth and started walking around wiping down tabletops, wiping her face, too, now and then. Her eyes were red and bleary; obviously she was taking her ex-husband's death pretty hard.

Which I suppose meant this was a real imposition on my part, but I had decided to play it by ear, so to speak, and see if I could get into the business office

somehow, or at least look through the window into the room where Buddy Shepard had been murdered.

"Hey, I told you to go home. The cops are done with us for now." That voice came from the front of the restaurant, the bar area. A tall, blond, nondescript man—a man I recognized as the bartender, Benny Grammet—had just walked in. "You shouldn't be doing this, Linda. You need to rest."

She whipped the cloth at him across several tables, upsetting a couple of salt and pepper shakers.

"Don't you tell me what I need! Don't anybody tell me what I need!" Then she sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

I lay low, filling out that application like it was the most interesting thing on earth. Grammet sat down beside her, his arm around her shoulders.

"Oh, Benny, I know they think I did it. That cop's been watching me all day. They were here again this morning and asked me more questions. Then they took me over there—to Buddy's office. They asked me about his books and his will—they know Buddy left me everything, that he and I owned the marina and the Rail Car fifty-fifty. But I thought they said Joe did it! Didn't you tell them

you heard Buddy and Joe arguing?"

"Of course I did. You know I did," Grammet said to her in a kind of low, Southern-style voice.

"And they asked me when you left and when you came back. They asked me if you normally made deliveries to the boats out in the bay."

"Look, I explained all that to them myself. It's okay. Really it is."

"I think they suspect you or me or both of us—"

Even I, kid lying low, could hear the panic in her voice . . . and the way she seemed to depend on his reassurance.

"Look, I delivered those orders before nine last night. We both saw Buddy around ten when he came over for a drink. A dozen people saw him with us. The police know I had nothing to do with it. You're worrying for nothing."

"But that cop, that Sergeant Valari—he kept asking me the same questions over and over," she said.

I sank down lower at the table and stopped writing, afraid the sound of the pencil might remind them I was still there.

"It's an old cop trick. They want to see if you slip up, if you start giving different answers to the same questions. But you won't slip up, Linda, because

you had nothing to do with it. I told Valari I heard Joe McClarey arguing with Buddy around six. I went over myself to see if Buddy was okay, but everything was fine so I left. Then we all saw Buddy again around ten. Joe must have come back after you and I went home."

"It said in the paper this morning that Joe's fingerprints are all over that digger," she said. "And that he's denying he had anything to do with Buddy's murder. He's saying he just went driving around and that he didn't visit his wife because he was too depressed. But Joe and Buddy got along real fine, better than Buddy did with most of the fishermen around here. I just don't understand why Joe would do it."

That's when this Benny Grammet noticed me. "Who the hell are you?" he wanted to know.

"Oh, just some kid who wants a job. I should have told him to come back later." Mrs. Shepard looked over at me. "Leave him alone, Benny." Then she broke into tears and put her face on the table again.

"You looking for work, kid?" Benny Grammet asked, standing up with one hand still on Linda Shepard's shoulder. "Then why don't you get rid of that." He pointed at the bag of

lobster shells by the back door where Mrs. Shepard had left them. "Use the dumpster over on the other side of the marina. The cops aren't done going through the other one. Then you can come back in and do some sweeping up."

"Sure." I jumped to my feet, anxious to play my part. "Whatever you say, sir."

"If we decide to hire you, you'll be answering to me, you got that?"

"Sure, sure." I couldn't move fast enough, act eager enough

...
Or look stupid enough.

I cleaned the bar, dumped the trash, and watched the cop watch me. I'd figured out who he was: Officer Fred Andersen, not the sharpest cop on the local force. Still, if he saw me, he was sure to call Jake and say something, and then it would be all over. I didn't have a work permit, and Jake knew it. He'd also know I was out here snooping around.

I'd put on a white apron and pulled an old baseball cap that said "The Rail Car" low over my eyes so Officer Andersen couldn't get a good look at me. I hoped he'd only see a kid emptying trash, a kid wearing a Rail Car apron and a Rail Car cap, pushing a wooden broom stamped with "Property of The Rail Car."

I wandered back and forth across the parking lot, tossing bags of clam shells and lobster claws into the dumpster as clouds started to roll in. Suddenly it was eerie being out there with the night and the cold coming together. It was past six, and though I sometimes stayed this late at Mr. Hornton's, I never did that without calling my mother. I decided to call her and tell her I was staying at someone's house or make up some other convenient lie.

There was a pay phone in front of the restaurant, one of the old kind that had a folding door. As I stepped into it, I looked out across Little Icy Bay.

I hadn't so much as glanced at the water since I'd gotten there, my attention had been so totally focused on the business office and how I could get inside. But now as I looked out across the boat slips to the deep blue water, I noticed something funny. . . .

It was sunset, and the sky was turning lavender and blue and pale magenta and sleepy orange and maybe even a kind of sand beige. Salvage Island lay across the bay, a dense green, shaggy island of pitch pines and sandy bluffs, and behind it . . .

Behind it I should have been able to see the red tile roof of

Salvage Hill, the Hadrinham estate, or its twin towers like red rockets thrust up into the sky.

Because I *was* looking west, wasn't I? The sun was setting behind Manamesset Point, on the other side of Salvage Island . . . so why couldn't I see the estate?

I couldn't see it. Not from the East Manamesset Marina. The angle was wrong, or perhaps from this vantage point the estate was too low, too far southwest, so that Salvage Island was blocking my view of the house and even of the towers.

But hadn't Joe said he'd written a poem about seeing the estate from here, from Parson's Point and the marina?

I put down the phone and stepped outside the booth, hands on my hips. Inside the Rail Car I could hear Benny Grammet and Linda Shepard talking. The wake for Buddy Shepard was tomorrow from four to six, she was saying, then from eight to ten. Burial was on Sunday.

Parson's Point, Joe had said, from the marina. Or had he said from the old wharf?

The old wharf? I spun around in a complete circle, looking across the parking lot and beyond the business office to a couple of boarded-up hangars that were all that remained of the boatyard. The "old wharf" was

another boatyard a quarter of a mile south, a boatyard Buddy Shepard had forced out of business when he opened up here. Why hadn't I been listening better? When Joe had written that poem for a "pretty girl," he hadn't been here, not at this marina, he'd been farther down the coast where Parson's Point juts out into Manamesset Bay, and from there . . . from there maybe he had been able to see the twin towers of Salvage Hill.

I walked back into the restaurant in a daze. Benny Grammet was sitting at a table looking over a ledger. Linda Shepard was sitting in a corner booth, knees up against her chest. Grammet's cold blue eyes looked up at me. "You done?"

I had a strange feeling, as if I'd missed something important.

Linda Shepard put her head down on her knees. Grammet snapped, "Hey, kid, you work for me, you better answer when I talk to you."

I pulled off the apron and the baseball cap, put them on the bar, and said, "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I guess I'm not used to working so hard."

"Hell, hard? What are you, crazy, boy? This is nothing compared to what it's like when we're open." He gave Mrs. Shepard a quick look. "And we will be opening back up . . . real soon."

"Of course," Mrs. Shepard

replied softly, sarcastically, too. "My restaurant has a notoriety it never had before, doesn't it?"

"Bring your working papers in tomorrow morning," Grammet said, "and we'll put you on the list." That was my dismissal, so I left.

But all I could think about just then was a poem for a pretty girl . . . with a simple smile.

I had to find her.

"He says that when he left both his diggers were in the pickup." My mother's voice was tired, upset. "And that after he left he just drove around?" Now she sounded incredulous and angry. "He says he talked to Buddy Shepard around six, they argued a little over the price of clams, then he left and just drove around until midnight? He says he didn't see anyone or stop anywhere? And you believe him?"

"I can't discuss this with you." That was Jake's even, controlled voice. "I've said too much already."

"But I *can* discuss it—with anyone I like!" my mother retorted. "I've been talking to Sheila."

"Oh, Sheila McClarey—" Jake said with some annoyance.

"Yes, with Sheila McClarey."

I heard chairlegs scrape; they were sitting at the kitchen table. I could smell coffee, cinnamon

doughnuts; Jake had stopped in as he usually did on Saturday mornings. He must have been on his way to the station. Evidently the case was still his, for the time being.

"Sheila says they're moving Joe to Bridgewater State Hospital for psychiatric observation. She's going to see him this afternoon around four. It's the last time she'll be able . . ." Was my mother breaking down, or was she just angry and upset? ". . . to see him for a while. Anyhow, I'm going over to watch the children. Maybe Herbie will come with me." She paused rather abruptly. I could almost see her look in my direction—down the hall toward the bathroom. I was leaning on the other side of the bathroom door; quickly I went to the sink and turned on the water.

"You know Joe won't be able to make bail," she went on. "The man *has nothing*, and he's innocent. Damn you, Jake, you know he's innocent."

"I've got to go. I'm not doing any good here," Jake said.

More chair legs scraping. But my mother, God bless her, wasn't done with Jake yet.

"Listen to me, Jake, maybe I'm not as clever as my son, but I do know there's something wrong here. There's something you're not looking for, that you're ignoring."

“And what the hell is that, Emily?” Jake demanded, finally losing his temper.

My mother was undeterred. “Joe loves Annie,” she said. “He goes to see her every night, but he didn’t go to see her Wednesday night. He says he drove around for four, maybe five, hours? I don’t believe it. He went somewhere and he has an alibi, Jake, and *you’ve* got to find it.”

“And where do I start looking if Joe McClarey shuts himself up tighter than a clam?” Jake returned angrily. This time neither of them noticed that the water in the bathroom was no longer running.

Which is a good thing, because my mother’s voice was then so soft I could hardly hear it through the heavy oak door.

“When a man as good as Joe is quiet about something like this, it can only be for one reason. He’s protecting someone, Jake. So find out whom he’s protecting.”

I managed to come up with an excuse for my mother, told her I was helping Mr. Hornton out, working on some signs, stripping some boats. She was so wrapped up in Joe McClarey’s problem and with helping Sheila, she hardly heard me.

So it was just after noon that I flew off on my bike. As I did I

put together a quick summary of the events of Wednesday, September fourteenth, in my head. I knew I didn’t have all the information the police had; for example, I didn’t know the exact time of death. Neither did I have a list of people who had a grudge against Buddy Shepard, which the police probably did. But I did know the following:

Joe McClarey showed up at Mr. Hornton’s house around three fifteen that afternoon. After Mr. Hornton agreed to let Joe in on our secret clamming place, Joe and I and went out to Salvage Hill and dug clams until about four thirty. Then I went home. Joe must have gotten a bite to eat because he didn’t get to the Rail Car until six. After arguing briefly with Buddy, he left the Rail Car and, according to him, just “drove around.” He didn’t go to see Annie, which is something he usually does. No one saw him. He made no stops. He drove around until midnight, at which time he must have gone home.

Now add to this the fact that Buddy Shepard was last seen alive about ten that night when he walked into the Rail Car for a drink. At least a dozen people saw him, including Grammet, Linda Shepard, and ten other people, most of whom must have been customers. So Buddy Shepard was alive at ten o’clock, four

hours *after* the argument with Joe. After his drink, he walked back to the business office. The next time anyone saw him, he had a clam-digger—or fork—stuck through his neck and was lying on the floor of his office. The clam-digger had Joe's fingerprints all over it; it also had his initials carved into the handle. Worse, Joe insisted the two diggers he'd marked like this were both in the back of his pickup when he left the marina.

As for what Benny Grammet and Linda Shepard did at closing time—where they went, who saw them, what time they got to their own places—I knew nothing. So you might say I was operating in the dark, yet I knew that Officer Andersen had been watching the Rail Car restaurant yesterday as well as keeping an eye on the crime scene, which meant that either Linda Shepard or Benny Grammet or both were not out of the woods as suspects, not yet.

Because why couldn't either Benny Grammet or Linda Shepard have slipped back into the marina later that night and stabbed Buddy Shepard with one of Joe's clamming forks? Joe said he'd seen both of his initialed diggers in the back of his pickup before he left the marina. But maybe he was mistaken. Maybe someone, say stepping out with a bag of trash, had

gone over to Joe's truck and helped himself.

But if that were so, if Joe McClarey had been set up, why didn't he tell the police, his sister Sheila, and everyone else exactly where he'd gone after leaving the marina that night?

That seemed to be the question. I pedaled my bike out to Parson's Point, but this time I didn't turn off at the marina, I kept going until I turned down the road that led to the old wharf.

About two-tenths of a mile from the East Manamesset Marina, at the tip of Parson's Point, the old fishing wharf and boatyard were now just a lot of broken, rotting docks and skeletons of fishing boats, some lying on their sides, others still in wooden cradles waiting for repairs that would never come. I dropped my bike in the parking lot, an expanse of dark, moist sand. My feet sank into it, and I bent down and scooped some up.

The sand was full of bits of rotten, black wood. Evidently someone had pulled out part of the docks and dragged it across the lot. But if someone had started a demolition effort here, it had never been finished. An old Ford Torino, a relic from the sixties, was parked in a small, cleared area. It probably belonged to the occupants of a

house located a hundred yards up the beach.

It was about two thirty; the tide was still moving out. If Joe and I had been over at Salvage Hill, we'd have had several more hours of clamming. The tide hadn't even started to turn.

There was nothing else there, just the rotting docks and the deteriorating boats. As I stood there thinking, I heard a crunch of footsteps behind me. I spun around . . .

And came face to face with a pretty girl, or rather a pretty woman. She was tall and blonde, with braids hanging to her waist. She was wearing a red sweatshirt and jeans and carried a child's pail in one hand.

"Hello," she said. "I'm getting jingle shells. Do you want to help me?"

Behind her I could see the sun already beginning its slow, westward trek. It was heading straight for Salvage Island, the shaggy island in the distance with the twin towers of the house looking like rockets behind it.

"I make wind chimes. You make little holes, see, with a pin," she told me as we sat on a crumbling piling. "You put fishing line through it . . ." She picked out two perfect orange jingle shells, delicate shells of extraordinary color. She used

only the orange ones, she told me, not the yellow or white. Through each shell she punched a hole using a needle attached to a strand of clear fishing line.

"This beach has a lot of yellow and white ones," she told me, her expression unbearably gentle, her smile almost childlike . . . a simple smile.

"They're pretty," I agreed.

"Amanda! I've told you not to talk to strangers!"

Amanda turned and smiled at the woman behind us, a woman much like Amanda herself, tall with blonde hair and shining, fiercely blue eyes. The difference was in their eyes—one woman's shy and trusting; the other's angry and suspicious.

"I'm just helping her collect shells," I said, standing and wiping my hands on my pants. "Is she your daughter?"

"You may be just a boy, but she shouldn't be talking to strangers." The older woman reached out, grabbed the younger woman's hand. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"The sky must be real pretty here when the sun goes down," I had to speak quickly, before this woman took her daughter away.

"Yes," Amanda said with excitement. "Blue and gray and sometimes pink and orange—"

I looked up the narrow coast, the ragged seaweed-covered beach. The house up there must

have been owned by Mel Corcoran, the man who had drunk himself to death after Buddy Shepard dropped his fees so low it caused Mel and others like him to go bankrupt.

The woman was staring angrily at me. "Who are you?" she said again.

"You probably have to keep a close watch on your daughter, don't you?" I said to her.

"You're being impertinent, boy. What's your name?"

"In fact, you probably try not to let her out of your sight, right?" I pushed ahead, turning on my obnoxious, adolescent-boy persona.

Whatever works.

"The hell I don't," she snapped at me. "I work my fingers to the bone on the night shift, just to—" she frowned; she looked nervous; she knew something.

"Did you work Wednesday night?" I asked quickly. "The night Buddy Shepard was murdered?"

Blue eyes icy, hard. "What the hell you after, boy?"

"You aren't home on Wednesdays, are you?"

"I told you I work nights. I lock the house up good, and then I have to go to work," she snapped.

"She's alone a lot, isn't she?"

"I think you better go now, you just better go before I call the police."

I looked over at the docks, rotting, decaying, falling into the sea. "Your husband was Mel Corcoran, wasn't he?"

"Who *are* you, boy?" She came closer to me, but I stood my ground.

"Did you really go to work on Wednesday night, Mrs. Corcoran, or did you call in sick?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The marina's less than a quarter of a mile from here. You probably really hated Buddy Shepard."

Wow, that was pretty stupid, I remember thinking. But I kept standing there, confronting a woman who could be a murderer, right on her own turf.

"You get out of here! You get out of here now, you hear me?" she shrieked. Grabbing her frightened daughter's arm, she dragged her off toward the house.

It all made perfect sense, or so I thought as I pedaled the four miles out to the Manamesset County Detention Facility, what we call around here the county jail. As I rode, I was making plans in my head. It was going on a quarter to four; visiting hours were over at five. Sheila McClarey would be the crucial part of my plan. If things didn't work out the way I wanted, I'd go to see Jake,

though talking to him was really the last thing I wanted to do.

But even as I was putting the finishing touches on the plan I was cooking up, I realized something: this was going to be one heck of a long shot.

The reception area at the jail was nothing—heck, they even had a gift shop there. Apparently the county jail was a national historic site! But when I got to the visitors' area and had to sign in at a counter manned by two very ugly-looking corrections officers, I knew I was in for some trouble.

"You can't sign in unless you got a parent with you," the square-jawed woman at the counter told me as she leaned over the counter to peer more closely at me. "You *do* have a parent with you?"

"Yeah, um . . ." I tried to appear bewildered, looked behind me. I'd already seen that Sheila McClarey's name wasn't on the list yet.

That had been a major part of my plan—to convince the guards I was Sheila's son, that I'd arrived late—and maybe after a quick little frisk or something, I'd be allowed in to where Sheila and Joe were. Of course I couldn't predict how Sheila would react, seeing me there. She'd probably think something was wrong with one of the kids.

I was hoping I could quickly convince her that it was important I talk to Joe, if only for a minute.

"So, what is it, kid?" the woman repeated. "You here to see your dad?" Her voice softened a little. "Because you can't go in, not unless you got a parent or guardian with you."

"Yeah, well, my mother's on her way. She's . . . she's parking the car." And with that I grabbed the book, hurriedly signed my name, and then—my big mistake—I signed Sheila McClarey's name, too.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" the guard snapped. "You can't just go and sign somebody else's name. Don't you know that's forgery?"

I looked up at him. I was in a daze, thinking I knew it all, thinking I had figured it out in the blink of an eye, and now, suddenly wondering if I had.

She had already crossed out Sheila's name and was frowning at me. Strangely, though, her voice sounded almost kind. "Now, you got to wait, son, until your mother comes in. Why don't you just go and sit down over there." She indicated some dingy-looking red vinyl chairs. "Besides, I don't know . . ."

I guess she had recognized the last name, McClarey.

I didn't want her to think too much about it. I'd probably already sunk my own ship, so I

said, in my best obedient voice, "You're right, ma'am. I'll just go wait for her."

I was in a total sweat as I sat down. I'd ruined everything. The only way to save things now was to catch Sheila McClarey as she came in, beg five minutes of her time . . .

But what I really wanted—what I really *needed*—was five minutes of Joe's time. What if Sheila brushed me off? What if she . . .

That's when *she* walked in, not Sheila McClarey, but another woman. This time it wasn't thirteen-year-old Meggie Charleton, but a Hispanic woman with three small children: one in her arms, one asleep in an umbrella stroller, and a toddler at her feet. She was lugging a heavy diaper bag and a huge purse, both of which the female officer immediately began to go through. The child in her arms started to whine; someone handed him a lollipop. One of the other babies started to cry.

As though in a trance I got up and walked over to her, said, "Let me help you," in Spanish, and took the baby from her arms.

"Gracias," she murmured, and then in swift, fluent Spanish she asked me, "Is this where I sign?"

"Sí," I replied, nodding at the book where, now, my name and Sheila McClarey's had both

been neatly scratched out. That's when I saw my opportunity—and took it. The woman guard had stepped aside to speak to a supervisor; another had taken her place. So when the Hispanic woman signed her name and the names of her children—Juanita, Pedro, Juan—I added Herberto beneath them. Within minutes I found myself following her through the metal detectors and down a long hall, carrying the baby, Juan, his lollipop stuck to the side of my face.

Past two more guards we went and into the visitors' room, a glass and wire partition dividing it in two. The woman went off to say tearful words to her boyfriend or husband, and I went to the last seat on the right to face a surprised and stunned Joe McClarey through the wire mesh. The little boy was on my knee.

"Joe—" But I was still in that daze, lost in thought, sorting through pieces that seemed to have no point, no focus. I had already decided that Mrs. Corcoran, knowing her beautiful but simple daughter would be with Joe that night, had walked down the dirt road to the marina and killed Buddy Shepard with the clamming fork she'd taken from the back of Joe's truck. It would have been such an easy thing to do. Then may-

be she had gone to work late, or stayed away until Joe had left.

She knew Joe would tell no one. She knew Joe would hurt no one he loved, and he loved not only Annie, ill in the hospital, but Amanda Corcoran, her retarded daughter. To provide an alibi, Joe would have to hurt them both.

But as I tried to sort this out I found myself facing Joe through the wire mesh and looking into eyes that were immeasurably younger than my own. In a flash I knew I'd been wrong. Mrs. Corcoran, so protective of her daughter, could never hurt her either, and by hurting Joe McClarey—by *blaming* Joe—she could only hurt them both.

So in an instant all my questions changed, and I found myself asking new ones. "Joe, who knew about you and Amanda Corcoran?"

"Herbie, what are you doing here? What is going on? Is your mother here? Is Sheila with you?"

"I found the pretty girl with the simple smile, the one you wrote the poem for. You left the marina Wednesday night and went down the road to see Amanda Corcoran, didn't you?"

Right to the point, I thought. Shock him. Shock him first with my presence and then shock him with the truth.

"Herbie, no—" He seemed to

be reaching through the mesh to me. "No."

For a moment I wondered briefly about a man who could have this effect on people, especially on the women who knew and loved him—his sister, my mother, Annie Rafferty, who had married him knowing she wouldn't have much time with him—and now the beautiful but retarded daughter of Mel Corcoran.

But if he loved each of them passionately and well, each returned that love with the same passion and the same devotion, each refusing to hurt the man that all of them loved.

My mother had known. She had known his alibi included another woman, a woman he would not reveal for fear of hurting his beloved Annie. Better Annie know he was in jail for this crime, better that and believe in his innocence with all the passion my mother and Sheila did, than believe this of him . . .

"Mrs. Corcoran knew about you and Amanda, didn't she?" I asked.

"Oh, Herbie." His accent came through lyrical and pained. "It's not that way . . . Amanda, she's nearly forty and . . . and I've known her for years."

"But you love her, don't you? You're not taking advantage of her, are you, Joe?"

Were those tears in his eyes? How far *would* he go to protect those he loved? Risk this now, this imprisonment, a trial and possible conviction, maybe worse? What kind of man was this?

"Yes, of course I do."

"And Annie, too."

It was then those exceptional, indigo-blue eyes filled up with tears.

"Annie's dying. Were you waiting for the police to clear you? To find the real murderer? Or would you have come clean—after Annie's gone?"

"How old are you, Herbert Sawyer? How old are you?" Now he was mad, looking as though he'd like to hit me through the wire and glass, reach right through and strangle me.

"I can clear you, Joe, with a word, a single phone call . . . " Little Juan slapped a green and sticky hand on my face and started to laugh. "To Jake. You know that, don't you?"

"Don't, Herbie. Don't," he pleaded.

"But wouldn't Annie understand? If she's told? If somehow she hears? Wouldn't she understand?"

His eyes stared back at me, blue and scared, and I understood . . .

Just as I understood that what I'd always seen in his face and eyes was more than child-

like innocence. What I saw was confusion and a complete inability to perceive wickedness in others. Suddenly I felt a hundred years older than this man.

"No," I said. "Because you've been seeing Amanda Corcoran for years, and you never stopped seeing her, even after you and Annie . . ."

"Please, don't let me hurt my Annie," he begged.

"So . . . who killed . . ."

The little boy continued to laugh and slap my cheek with his sticky green hand; his mother was two seats over, speaking rapidly to a dark-haired man beyond the wire. I'd been wrong there, too; he wasn't her husband or boyfriend. She was talking to her son.

I should have assumed nothing, but I assumed too much, figured if I could find out where Joe had been Wednesday night, then I'd know . . .

But I knew nothing. I looked back at him.

"You were there, out at the old wharf. Which means your tire tracks should have been there; but I don't think they are. Jake would have checked the dirt road, checked to see if you parked your truck out there. Do you see what this means? Someone has removed your tracks, someone who knew where you were Wednesday night. And

that someone's gone to a lot of trouble to set you up."

He was no longer talking; his head was bent down. The little boy was struggling to get out of my arms, so I dropped him gently to the floor. As I did, I noticed a guard had just moved into the doorway.

"Joe?" I had to confront him now while he was weak. It might be my only chance.

"Who, besides Mrs. Corcoran, knew about you and Amanda? Who knew you'd be out there?"

He raised one hand pitifully, shook his head. He was bewildered and scared, but what was scaring Joe McClarey in that moment was that Annie, his beloved and dying Annie, would learn about his relationship with Amanda.

So I'd play on that, too, using cruelty in a way that surprised me. It seemed I was capable of anything.

"Think, Joe, think. Who else knew? Because if you can't tell me, I go to Jake, and I tell him everything I know."

"No one . . . no one," he started to whisper. "I've always been so careful and . . . I . . ." He hung his head again and I slammed my hand on the glass, arousing the interest of the guard, who started to come forward.

But Joe, seeing him approach, rapidly wiped his eyes on his sleeve, shook his head at the

guard. "The only one I ever told . . . and I must have been drunk at the time . . . is a good friend of mine. He smooths things over for me with Buddy, he does. Lent me money over the years, helped me get fishing jobs and . . ." He started to break down again, hung his head.

"Who?"

"And he promised he'd never speak a word to anyone, he did."

"Who? Who knew?"

"Ben Grammet, the bartender at the Rail Car."

This wasn't going to be easy. In fact, it was another long shot, and I considered for a moment if it was ethical or legal, or if in fact it might even be considered entrapment.

But that was ridiculous. I was a thirteen-year-old kid, for crying out loud. I wasn't a cop, a lawyer, or working for the D.A. I was just a kid on a hunch, a particularly wild hunch, but one I had to pursue. I'd come this far; I couldn't give up now.

I rode my bike home, arrived around six. Mom wasn't there; she'd left a note: "At Sheila's. Dinner in fridge." I didn't even bother to see what dinner was. I grabbed a cinnamon doughnut and a can of soda and was off again, this time in the direction of the East Manamesset Marina.

I said in the direction of the marina because again I rode past it and headed for the old wharf. I left my bike in the grass and walked over to the parking lot, where I got down on my knees and quickly filled my pockets. Like I said, it was a long shot.

And if I was wrong and people yelled and screamed at me later, so what? I was just a thirteen-year-old kid, right?

Except I knew . . . no, I *felt* I was right. There was a connection between all these people: Joe McClarey, Amanda Corcoran, Buddy Shepard, and Benny Grammet, but it wasn't necessarily a connection that had caused the crime; what it had done was set up the conditions *to let the crime happen*.

How do I explain this? It was an *emotion* connecting one event to another, and obscuring one event with another. Even Linda Shepard was involved . . . at least I was hoping she was. I was hoping that she shared the same *emotion* that had been used—and abused—to create, and then cover up, this murder.

I got back on my bike, and this time when I reached the main road I turned off and went down to the marina.

"Well, look who it is. Boy, you sure know how to pick your times," she said to me. Linda Shepard was standing at the bar

of the Rail Car. She had a drink in one hand—and probably a lot more drink in her. But I had planned on her being here. The wake hours were from four to six, then eight to ten. She'd come back here for that in-between period like I thought she would.

"That's me." I tried to smile self-consciously. "Mister-in-the-wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time." Then I told my first lie. I had two others coming. "I left my jacket in the kitchen. Can I go get it?"

"Sure," she smiled. She seemed grateful to see another human being. "Then come back and have a drink with me."

I went into the kitchen, did what I had to do, returned, and slid onto a barstool. Then I let her pour me a tall ginger ale. Despite the fact she'd been crying again and looked utterly worn out, she was a very attractive woman. She was wearing what my mother would call a conservative dark blue suit; her blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail.

"So, you got your papers?" she asked, leaning on the bar, smiling at me. "I need to see if you're legal before I hire you."

"How come, Mrs. Shepard, you always say I . . . and me, *my* place, *my* restaurant?"

"'Cause it is now, ain't it?" She smiled grimly, then stood

back. "Damn fool Buddy was. I don't know how he could have been so stupid. He must have turned his back on whoever . . ." She looked away from me and wiped her eyes.

"What I mean is when Mr. Grammet's around he says . . ." I paused. I wanted her full attention; I got it. ". . . we, and us and *our* bar, *our* restaurant, like it all belongs to him. You going to marry Mr. Grammet?"

"Hey, what are you, some kind of . . . junior detective?" she tried to smile, sniffled, wiped her eyes again.

"So you aren't going to marry Mr. Grammet? You still loved your husband, didn't you?"

"Damn right I did!" she shouted, slamming her hand down on the bar so hard it made me jump. I felt like shouting bingo! because I'd wanted her to say that. "We were going to try it out again, get married, I mean. I don't think anyone knew, it was just between Buddy and me . . . and maybe Benny. Oh, we tell Benny too damn much, the sympathetic bartender, you know? Still, why am I telling a kid . . ." She slung back the drink, then faced the windows that overlooked the bay.

"You really loved Buddy." I wanted her to say it again.

But we were about to be interrupted; I'd planned on this, too.

"So here you are—" It was

Benny Grammet, the door slamming behind him.

Because if Linda had come out here between visiting hours, I'd figured Grammet would be with her.

"I told you I wanted to be alone, Benny," she said to him, softly, not angrily. "I need time to think."

"Not you again." Benny was looking at me. "You know, I've decided we won't be needing you. You can go now. You're upsetting Mrs. Shepard. Go on, get out of here."

"But I had a question to ask you, Mr. Grammet," I said, feeling myself cringe. If I was depending on Mrs. Shepard to come to certain conclusions, maybe I was playing this a little bit too close to the cuff. She was drunk, or soon would be. And Grammet was dangerous . . .

Definitely so. Benny Grammet, who had already appropriated this restaurant and the marina, at least in his mind. He was planning to marry Linda Shepard, and suddenly I saw the final impetus, the motive that had compelled him to drive Joe's clamping fork into Buddy's neck when he turned his back, perhaps to get a ledger or check a file.

Buddy and Linda were planning on remarrying, which would ruin all of Benny's plans.

So for Benny Grammet, the

solution had been simple, if drastic: eliminate the competition, get rid of Buddy Shepard, and blame it on Joe . . . Joe who would conveniently be over at the old wharf with a girlfriend, Amanda Corcoran. Benny knew that Joe guarded and protected Amanda for two reasons: she was retarded, and Joe had a wife dying in a local hospital who knew nothing about Amanda. Joe would go on naively, innocently, counting on the police to find the real murderer, assuming others would protect him, too.

Grammet had been counting on one other thing: that Joe would never be able to unravel the truth. Grammet was as evil and duplicitous as Joe was innocent, and Joe couldn't see evil in people.

But me, twenty years younger than Joe, I had no trouble seeing it. I was seeing it now.

"And what's that?" he demanded.

"Well, I heard some fishermen . . ." The second lie. "They were over at the general store. Actually they were arguing about something, about whether they ought to tell the police what they saw on Wednesday night out at Parson's Point."

Now I had *his* full and complete attention. That was good.

"They said they saw Buddy Shepard's boat go around the

point and tie up at the old wharf. It was there ten or fifteen minutes."

"Did they?" Grammet said with a snide smile. Linda Shepard was turning to look at me.

"Around nine maybe, they weren't sure. They didn't know whether or not they ought to tell the police. They were just a couple of old guys, you know, jawing away about nothing . . . except that I got to thinking . . ." I looked over at Linda Shepard. "I mean, I heard you and Mr. Grammet, ma'am, talking about him delivering take-out orders that night, out in the bay? So that had to be it, right, you were delivering a takeout order using Mr. Shepard's boat—to the old wharf, right?"

"Benny?" Linda was looking at him. "Were you at the old wharf? I thought the orders were for our regulars out in the cove."

"How do they know it was Buddy's boat?" Benny asked.

"Unmistakable. I heard one of the men use that word. A white Formula 336 with a red racing stripe, moving a good thirty or forty knots at least. Someone in a hurry."

"So maybe I did go out past the point, take his boat for a little spin, so what?" Benny shrugged, looked at Linda Shepard. "Hey, it's a nice boat.

What do you want from me? I'm sorry."

"Those old guys," I went on, embellishing my lie even further, "they were out there a long time . . . till past midnight . . . they say they saw the boat go by a second time, around one, and it did the same thing, tied up at the wharf, then left about twenty minutes later."

Now Benny was on me: "What the hell you trying to pull? I took the boat out once . . . once, kid. Those fishermen were probably drinking." But then something came over him and he moved a step closer to me. I slid back on the barstool. "Who else knows about this?"

"I don't know." I shrugged, looked stupid. "Those fishermen, I guess, and the police, if they decide to tell them."

He turned away, was looking toward the door . . . and I slipped quietly off the barstool. Linda Shepard was moving around the bar, her hand reaching out to touch Grammet.

"Benny, what does this mean? Were you out at the old wharf? Why? Why did you decide . . . on Wednesday night . . . to go out there? I really would like an explanation because I'm confused."

I backed away toward the kitchen, watching and listening as I reached inside the kitchen door for the broom I'd left there,

the one stamped "Property of The Rail Car."

"I went out there once, after I delivered the takeouts. I just felt like taking a little spin. Things were slow that night, so . . ."

"I think he knew, Mrs. Shepard, and he counted on Joe being out there," I said from the kitchen door. "He knew Joe was going to visit Amanda Corcoran. So Benny went out there around nine. He tied the boat up at the old wharf, and he went up the beach to the parking lot where Joe's truck was. He got the clamming fork out of the back of the truck and brought it back here, where he used it to kill your husband."

"What the hell—" she started, turning to me, then to Benny. "What is he talking about, Benny?"

"When I heard those fishermen, I knew how it all went together." I was looking at Benny Grammet, wondering how long I could play this, me and my fictional fishermen. "You came back . . . and at some time you went out to the business office." I shrugged. "And it wouldn't have taken you long. You just stabbed Mr. Shepard, left the digger in his neck, and came back. Maybe you pretended to use the men's room or something . . . nobody missed you. But you made a couple of mistakes, Mr. Grammet. Those fish-

ermen saw you go out past the point to the wharf. You took this with you." I was holding up the broom, the one I'd stuffed with sand and pieces of rotten wood taken from the parking lot of the old wharf. "You had to go back a second time to erase Joe's tire prints after he left. You didn't want the police to find out he'd been there, with Amanda. Then he'd have an alibi. You were counting on the fact that Joe wouldn't tell anyone about Amanda, especially with Annie dying. You swept away his tire prints—with this."

"You little bastard!" He was on me before I—or Linda Shepard—could react, seizing the broom and shoving me to the floor.

I have to admit I landed kind of hard; it knocked the wind right out of me. Linda cried out, "Benny, don't!," but Grammet was already over me, broom held high.

"I ought to break your neck!" he shouted. Suddenly things weren't going quite the way I'd planned. Because if Mrs. Shepard and he were in it together, I was a goner.

"Benny, talk to me!" she demanded. "Is he right? Did you do that? Did you—"

"You going to believe some stupid kid?" he shouted, still watching me as I struggled to catch my breath. "Of course I

didn't—" That's when he raised the broom again, threatening me with it. As he did, I felt something hit my face—little grains of sand and rotten pieces of wharf.

I wiped my face with my hand, improvising with my final lie: "Then what's this?" I held up my hand so Linda could see I had black pieces of something on my fingers. "It's all through the broom. I noticed it when I was sweeping up yesterday. Pieces of rotten wood . . . they got stuck in the broom when you used it to sweep Joe's tire tracks off the parking lot over at the old wharf."

I suppose that's what startled him and made him freeze, seeing pieces of rotted wharf fall onto the floor. He turned the broom and looked at it, then pulled a long piece of wharf piling from between the bristles. "But I didn't use *this* to wipe—" It was too late. He turned to meet Linda Shepard's appalled face. With the glass she still held in her hand she clubbed him, smashing him against the side of the face as she screamed, "God damn you!"

Like I said, I was counting on the same emotion that ran through this affair from one end to the other: love. Joe's love for Annie . . . Joe's love for Amanda. My mother's long-ago love for Joe.

And Linda Shepard's love for Buddy.

They took Benny Grammet away in a pool of blood; his face needed twenty-two stitches by the time Linda was done with him. Jake was there, and Officer Andersen, who was scratching his head and saying, "Thought it was you, Herbie, out here sweeping yesterday, but I couldn't be sure. You've gotten so tall."

"Shut up," Jake told him. He glared at me.

"I had to do this, Jake," I said. I was determined not to apologize. "I had no choice. I mean, you can yell and scream at me. You can do whatever you want. But I had to do this."

"And why is that?" he demanded, just as determined to threaten, frighten, and punish me for something I was finally realizing I had very little control over.

"Because this time I did it out of love."

"Love!" he screamed, drawing the attention of the EMT's, the other police officers there, and even the captain, who strangely enough wasn't out on a fishing

trip this time. No, he was over at the bar, consoling Linda Shepard, who had badly bruised her hand pummeling Benny Grammet with her drink glass.

"Yes, sir. Love." I said respectfully. "I did this one for my mother."

Next Monday in school, I turned in my health card and decided I really didn't dislike Mrs. Filiades. She was almost friendly to me, told me she was starting up a school newspaper.

That interested me. What the heck, I figured, why not give junior reporting a whirl?

When I said yes, I'd like to sign up, she tucked the health card into her little file folder and said, "Well, the first meeting's this afternoon. Maybe . . ."

We both heard the other person clear her throat. She was standing in the doorway, books pressed to her chest.

"Sorry, Mrs. Filiades," I said quickly, "maybe next week will be better." I started for the door where Meggie Charleton was waiting for me. "This afternoon I have things to do."

And debts to pay off.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the April issue.

Old Sheriff Tom Dunn wondered why lately so many cars were pulling into the blacktop parking lot of the Shady Stop mall on the outskirts of Oak Grove. Business wasn't *that* good.

Then a young man crashed his car near the town. He was unquestionably high on cocaine. The sheriff quizzed him at length in the hospital.

"All I can recall," said the youth, "is that I got it from Mr. Kowalski at the Shady Stop mall."

Old Tom Dunn snorted. "That's no help, son. All them nine stores out at Shady Stop is owned by a Kowalski. Old Nate Kowalski built 'em so each of his nine sons and their wives would have a store to operate. Doan' you know the first name of that pusher?"

The bandaged young man in the hospital bed thought for a long time. "Now I remember! His name was Ike—Ike Kowalski. That's it!"

The old sheriff headed for the mall. The nine stores were laid out in checkerboard fashion, with one in the middle, one on each of the north, east, south, and west sides, and four at the corners. Each store was painted a different color, and each handled a different product.

Sheriff Dunn discovered that:

(1) Carl's store is just north of Kathy's and just west of the white one. None of the three sells clothing.

(2) Maria's store is just south of the blue one and just east of the furniture store (which is not the central one).

(3) Bert, Dan, and Hank include Julia's husband, the florist, and the Kowalski son in the red store.

(4) Quilla, one of the nine wives, helps operate her husband's store just south of the paint store and just north of the yellow one.

(5) Andy's place of business is immediately east of the clothing store and just west of the brown one.

(6) The bookstore is just north of Laura's place and northeast of the gray store.

(7) The four corner stores include the drapery shop, the purple store, and those operated by Gus and by Polly.

(8) The bakery, the grocery store, and the hardware store include the central one, Bert's place, and the store painted brown.

(9) Nora is in the store immediately south of Elmo and just southeast of the hardware store.

(10) Rosie (who does not sell books) operates the corner store which is diagonally opposite the one painted orange.

(11) The grocery is on the corner diagonally opposite the green store.

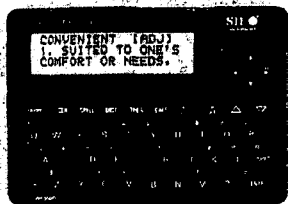
(12) Hank is just east of Olga and just west of Fred.

"Aha!" said the wily old sheriff. "Now I know where to find Ike, that dirty, lowdown, no-account polecat." He proceeded to make the arrest.

In which store was Ike, the cocaine distributor?

See page 134 for the solution to the February puzzle.

MAIL ORDER MALL



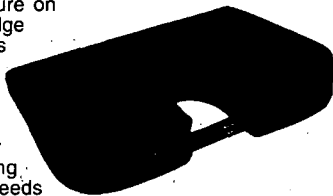
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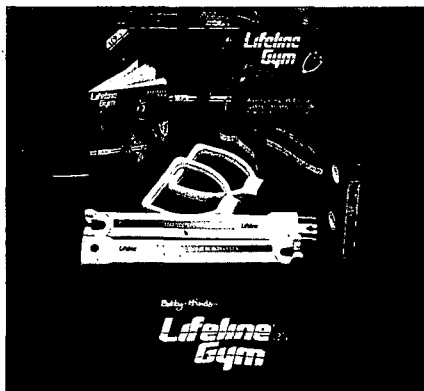
TUSH CUSH

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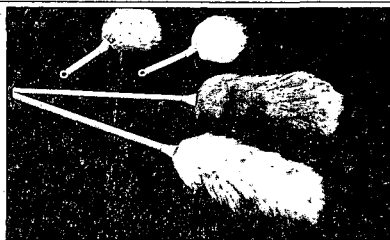


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FICTION



FRANKLY, MY DEAR, I DON'T GIVE A HERD OF SCARLETTS

O. S. Flanagan



Illustration by Jim Odbert

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/96

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**A**lma reached me on my cellular phone while I was stuck on Atlanta's Downtown Connector in a bottleneck, compliments of an overturned truck packed with frightened pigs. "Callie, is your home telephone out of order?"

"I don't know which is aging more rapidly, my utilities or my body. The repairman has graciously agreed to visit me between the convenient hours of Monday and Thursday. If it's not a problem inside the house, which he'll correct immediately at my expense, they absolutely guarantee that he'll get around to fixing it in no less than another ten days."

"I've noticed you get a little testy around your birthdays these last few years. Remember, birthdays beat the only alternative. I have an assignment that will pick you up. A charity ball at the Peachwood Country Club."

"No way, Alma. And spare me the 'business is business' lecture. I can tell I'm not going to want to do it." I swerved to avoid an escapee hog making a mad dash toward the Georgia Tech campus.

"Callie, get a pretty antebellum outfit from Harvey's Costumes, and go as your favorite *Gone with the Wind* character. When I look at you, Scarlett immediately comes to mind."

"'Long in the tooth' comes to my mind. Why, just for the sake of discussion, do you want me to go to this party?"

"My friend Daphne Bickers is the chairwoman of the event. Charles LeeSmith is honorary chairman."

"That handsome Atlanta commissioner indicted for embezzling funds from the public works department? The Swain of Sewer?"

"He was selected before he became popularly known by that nickname. He's insinuated that he'll sue the club if they dump him because it might be interpreted as an indication of his guilt. So they're stuck with him. But now Daphne says someone wants to kill him during the event."

"Alma, we're private investigators, not bodyguards."

"LeeSmith already has a squad of pituitary giants. Daphne's hoping we can identify the culprit before anything unpleasant happens."

"How does she know someone wants to kill him?"

"I sorta hate to tell you this part." Alma paused. "A telephone psychic told her."

I almost hit another runaway porker. "Are we short of money or something?" I asked.

Daphne Bickers was a trim middle-aged woman with dark



hair pulled back in a cascade of curls and lots of expensive makeup, including eyeshadow that perfectly matched her dress. She was making me tired as we followed her around, trying to learn about our case while she nervously flitted from one table to another like a bee working a summer garden. Despite the purported gravity of the situation, she'd been too busy with caterers and florists to explain matters to us before the ball. It was hard to keep up with her because she was wearing the same green-sprigged dancing dress as over fifty percent of the female attendees. Remember the one Scarlett wore to the Wilkeses' barbecue? It was represented in everything from petite to really large, all girded with a big sash that held a dainty, bright green hanky. Nearly all the men sported Confederate uniforms.

I'd stood my ground and refused to wear a costume. I knew my blue funk centered around the passing of time and eras (I'd been reminiscing with Elvis recordings a lot), but I wasn't quite ready to return to life at Tara.

"Do you talk to telephone psychics often?" I asked our client.

"No!" she answered indignantlly. "I have a *local* personal consultant. But Carvella was out of town, and with the ball so close,

I needed to know what was going to happen. This is the biggest social event in Atlanta since the premiere of *Gone with the Wind* in 1939. Did I mention that my mother met Carole Lombard when she attended with Clark Gable? They went to the restroom together in the old Loew's Grand Theater. Mom and Carole, not Carole and Clark. Arsonists burned down that theater and Margaret Mitchell's apartment, the one she called The Dump. We're donating these proceeds to the '96 Olympics."

Okay. Alma's rule number forty-three. Never insult a client, even if she is a world-class subject changer.

"So this person told you Lee-Smith's going to be murdered here?"

Daphne finally sat down for a moment. "Well, what she said exactly was that she saw the death of a man I despise and yet need for tonight. It has to be the Swain. Practically everyone in Atlanta wants Lee-Smith out of here one way or another." She paused. "Actually, I guess it could also describe my husband. Except that I'm the only one who'd want to kill Davis."

"You'd like to see your husband dead?"

Daphne picked up a fried chicken leg. "Absolutely! See the young lady dressed in this



same outfit over by the bar? The one with cleavage up to her chin? She's Christie Habershaw, Davis's latest conquest and an associate at Quarles and Bickers, Atlanta's foremost law firm with the stupidest name. They're handling LeeSmith's defense together. Davis told me several days ago that he plans to divorce me to marry her. Picture it, two legal sharks romantically swimming hand in hand, or, better yet, tooth in fang, into the sunset. We have a prenup, so I'll no longer be able to afford to be the social maven of Atlanta. I convinced him to keep it a secret until after tonight. I don't blame her. She's bright, young, and lovely. Everything a man in his midlife crisis looks for in a wife. She'll be good for him."

I didn't know what to say, so I picked up a pita chip and plunged it into a creamy dip. I was never so kind about Miss Young 'n' Perky who accompanied Dumbo, my ex, to live happily forever after.

Daphne smiled sadly as she watched Christie charm a bartender. Then she turned back to us. "That crab dip is supposed to be delicious. Is it?"

"Sure. You want some?" I reached for another chip.

"No! I would go into anaphylactic shock. Something Davis and I still have in common. Extremely weird IgE antibodies.

Even a tiny taste of any fish can kill us. We don't even touch seafood with our hands. To be safe, the caterer let me examine every recipe used tonight."

Alma was studying the crowd. "Tell me about this telephone service," she said.

"It's a 900 number that Christie saw on television."

She got the number from her husband's, uh, associate? Too much late night television had left me wondering about The Phenomenon. Such as who anoints one a *Master Psychic*? The State Board of Mind Reading? Is there a written test, or do they qualify over the telephone at four ninety-five a minute?

I kept my questions to myself.

After Daphne drifted off to talk to more guests, I felt a tap on my shoulder and found myself facing Leona Stafford, a former client. Between gnawing on a barbecued rib and slugging down a giant margarita, Leona, a not-so-quintessential grandmother, sputtered, "Callie, is something up, or are you and Alma here disguised as Belles of the Future?"

"Hi, Leona, nice to see you. I'm just people-watching right now."

"This isn't what I imagined as your kind of social event."

"Alma said it was this or continual screenings of *Ishtar*."



"Tough choice." Leona followed my stare to a woman grazing at the dessert table. "Judge Maxwell is worth watching. Once upon a time she thought Davis Bickers was going to dump Daphne for her. Davis came to his senses but not before Her Honor's husband got wind of the affair. Mr. Maxwell took offense at the idea and divorced her. The alimony and child support payments keep her strapped for money."

I stared at the large justice. "Davis and the judge?"

Leona nodded. "Yep. She was attractive then, but she ate every bakery empty after the affair. Rumor has it that she's on the take from lots of bad folks. Maybe even the Swain. Davis has hinted that if he runs for office in November he'll expose her sticky fingers."

"What do you know about the Swain? Is he an Atlanta native?"

"No. He came from somewhere near Detroit. Same university that gave us our new Mrs. Davis Bickers trainee. Wish he'd go back."

"How do you know all this?"

Leona grinned innocently. "By playing golf here at the club with the girls."

With that omniscient source, Leona probably knew the true whereabouts of Jimmy Hoffa.

\*

Before she drifted off for more food and drink, Leona snagged Davis Bickers and introduced us. He was accompanied by his law partner, Sam Quarles.

"Ms. Adams, I know why you're here," Davis said, "but trust me, the Swain is in no danger. Those metal detectors he has at all the doors are just more hysteria."

"I understand you and Ms. Habersham are defending him."

Davis stiffened. "I'm defending him in front of Lifer Wainwright. Christie is a beautiful girl but a mediocre lawyer. She probably should have stuck with her first career choice, forensics. But she only made it to one autopsy, where she promptly threw up on the deceased."

Sam Quarles chuckled. "I told you she was no Clarence Darrow when she tried to help me with the Latto case." He turned to me. "I got him off that professional-murder rap with no help from Davis's newest beloved."

Davis shrugged his shoulders. "She's not very good at being devious either, but I can forgive her. I'm going to take care of the Swine—excuse me, a little too much bourbon—I mean the Swain in my own way, settle a few scores, and then it's off to Washington at the taxpayers' expense for Christie and me."

"You're going into politics?"



"Yes, ma'am. Sam and I have fought tooth and nail in this firm since we got out of college. We can't stand each other, but we thought the combination of names was too good to pass up. Once he pays me big bucks under our partnership buyout clause, we won't have to hate each other every day. Right, pal?"

Sam smiled for the first time, but rather sourly. "Give Pennsylvania Avenue my regards, Davis, but not with my money in your pocket. I told you I don't have it and have no way to get it."

I watched Ms. Habersham, a mighty sexy barristerette, bring smiles to several men as she worked the room. Eventually she arrived at a bar at the same time as Charles LeeSmith.

I wandered up and introduced myself. Christie Habersham was in her early thirties, with thick blonde hair piled loosely around an odd chartreuse pin. Her unblemished, totally unadorned, peachy complexion made me jealous. With no eye makeup I look like a tranquilized rabbit.

A roving photographer got a candid shot of the three of us before moving on to other unsuspecting victims.

Charles LeeSmith asked, "Are you Alma Adams's niece?"

"And business partner."

"Y'all are well thought of in the investigative business. We could use you to look into my case. Except that we're out of time. We go to court next week. Davis says this is it."

Christie flashed a big smile. "Maybe not. I think we'll get a continuance. Then we won't have to go before Judge Wainwright because he retires next month. We'll get Maxi Maxwell, and I'll plead an impressive case before her."

I? Apparently Davis hadn't told her his strategy.

"She hates Davis." Charles winked at me conspiratorially.

Christie shook her head. "No problem. It'll be like that last homecoming game." She smiled at LeeSmith.

Her client chuckled. "You really think our odds are 48 to 0? Isn't that Her Honor over there by the ham and grits table? That dress looks much better on you, Christie."

LeeSmith deserted us to entertain Judge Maxwell, and I turned to Ms. Habersham. "Have you known Mr. LeeSmith long?"

"We met when I took his case."

"I thought I heard you went to college together."

Christie curled her lip. "Please. He's *much* older than me. Besides, Michigan is a huge institution."

“How long have you practiced law here in Atlanta?”

“Half a decade. Did Daffy tell you about someone murdering LeeSmith tonight? I can’t believe she relies on that trash. If you’ll excuse me, I see some clients.” She grabbed a baby back rib and munched her way across the room.

I admit it, I’d been thinking our client was an airhead. But she was enough of a lady to be kind in her comments about her successor. When Christie crudely referred to her predecessor-elect, it was a struggle for me to muzzle a nasty retort.

While I munched on a piece of cornbread, Daphne returned with another woman wearing that same damn dress. How many copies did Harvey’s Costumes have?

“Callie, where’s Alma? I wanted you both to meet Dorothy LeeSmith, Charles’s ex-wife.”

“Hello. I didn’t realize Mr. LeeSmith was married,” I said.

“It was only for my inheritance, which got him through college in better style than the GI Bill. I found out he’d had a mistress all those years, but when we got to court, her name turned out to be the biggest mystery since Stonehenge. After Davis Bickers got through representing Chuckie in our divorce, I’m amazed I was granted custody of my last name. To

make sure his client prevailed, Davis dragged out every big gun he had and shot me with all of them. Thanks to him, I’ve filed for bankruptcy and am making ends meet by doing private nursing.”

Daphne got tears in her eyes listening to her friend’s plight and possibly considering her own similar situation. She dabbed at her eyes surreptitiously with her little hanky to avoid embarrassing the ex-Mrs. LeeSmith.

I wondered who would represent Daphne. I wished it could be Ben Matlock.

I miss Raymond Burr. And the late columnist Lewis Grizzard, Atlanta’s beloved curmudgeon of politically incorrect wit.

Sorry, I digressed. Passing of eras stuff again.

I walked around the ballroom for a while, trying to keep LeeSmith in sight. Then I noticed a herd of Scarletts led by Christie and including Daphne, the judge, and Dorothy heading for the restroom. I followed them.

I found Daphne and Christie facing off over a stall. They kept bumping into each other as their hoops flared up behind them.

Daphne was apparently losing patience. “For God’s sake, Christie, get out of my way. This isn’t the last toilet on



earth." Christie won the contest, though, and disappeared behind the door, but not before Daphne's sash was untied and Christie's hair even more disarrayed.

Judge Maxwell was washing her hands at a nearby sink. "This sauce is like paint. I'll never get it out from under my nails. Can you believe that snake, the Swain, was just trying to butter me up? So, Daphne, how is Davis?"

"Fine."

"Shame."

Dorothy was checking her makeup. "Cool it, girls. The hate-Swain-and-Davis lines form behind me."

Christie didn't defend her beloved or her client on her quick sweep out of the restroom. Her loose long hair hid any expression on her face.

When I came out of the restroom, Alma grabbed my arm. "The Hat Squad is here."

It meant trouble if Atlanta's homicide department, who apparently have an incurable Elliott Ness haberdashery fetish, had arrived. I looked toward the crowd surrounding a buffet. The pants of a Confederate uniform protruded from under the tablecloth.

Uh-oh.

Alma and I waited until one of the homicide detectives, Lieu-

tenant Joe Suggs, approached us. "Miss Alma, Callie, it's good to see you. Y'all here on business?"

Alma answered him. "Hello, Joe. Somebody predicted this might happen. Where were his bodyguards when he was killed?"

Joe looked around. "What bodyguards? The Swain is the only person here who had goons."

I was confused. "Wait a minute. Isn't Lee Smith dead?"

"No, ma'am. The victim is that attorney, Davis Bickers."

Whoops!

Alma's reputation is respected by the authorities, and the police allowed us in their group around the corpse, which was shrouded under a tent of tablecloth. All the other guests were corralled at a distance behind yellow tape. A row of potted palms that had probably screened the crime from observation by the revelers protected the crime scene from view now. When the body was turned over, we could see an almost bloodless hole with the murder weapon protruding from his head. Davis Bickers had left this world via a penetrating wound in the back of the head just above the hairline.

Alma asked Lieutenant Suggs

quietly, "Does that look like a bone to you?"

"Yep. But I don't think I've ever seen one used as a murder weapon before. We'll let the coroner remove it, but it sure looks like it's maybe a poultry bone. Except for the color. So, unless you saw somebody whittling away over at the fried chicken table, this was premeditated. It explains how someone could get the weapon through the X-ray checkpoint. I guess somebody cornered him behind those plants and stabbed him. An incision there would sever the brain stem, and he'd die instantly and quietly. Old professional hit trick."

Hank Butler, the Fulton County coroner, joined the group. In his trademark black suit and a tie decorated with orange and yellow flames, he always looked like a poster child for Dante's *Inferno*. He removed the weapon and inspected it. Sure enough, it looked exactly like a drumstick bone that had been honed into a sharp spike and dyed lime green. It also looked strangely familiar.

"Pretty disgusting when someone makes a weapon out of Henry Penny's body parts," Joe Suggs said. While the coroner's assistants were pulling the body from under the table, he turned to a waiter leaning against the wall. "You found the body?"

"Yep. I was bringing a tray of food and saw his legs sticking out. I checked to be sure he was dead—I'm a part-time paramedic—and then left him as I found him. I was the one who called you."

Alma cringed as they rolled Bickers' back over. His eyes were wide open, giving him a frozen, startled expression. I swallowed back the taste of the numerous hot wings I'd consumed and made myself stare at the body.

"What's that in his hand?"

Lieutenant Suggs knelt and examined the clenched fist. "I think it's a handkerchief."

"It comes with the ballgown worn by half the women here," I said. "Is that blood on it?"

He smelled the cloth before carefully touching the stain and then tasting his finger. "Nope. Barbecue sauce. Maybe he borrowed it to wipe his hands."

Alma shook her head. "No. I'll bet he didn't do that."

Daphne was brought over to our group by a policeman supporting her by her elbow. She was incredibly calm as she quietly stared at her husband's form. I noticed that the handkerchief was missing from her waistband.

"Okay, you're right," I whispered to Alma. "I'm not depressed any more about aging."





I'm sorry Davis Bickers won't have an opportunity to get older."

Alma just smiled and nodded.

Just then Christie burst into the group, tears streaming from her eyes. She lunged at Daphne. "You killed him! How could you do it? This gorgeous man was in his prime, lean, robust, and now sliced from life."

It was all very dramatic except that she made the deceased sound like sirloin tip roast.

Lieutenant Suggs tried to calm her while he gently questioned her. "Why do you think Mrs. Bickers murdered her husband?" he asked.

"Because he was divorcing her to marry me. And she'd been talking about that psychic who *supposedly* told her that Charles LeeSmith would be killed tonight. She probably made it up so everyone would be watching LeeSmith when she stabbed my poor Davis." Ms. Habersham was working herself into a truly self-righteous frenzy. "She even hired this Granny Goose Detective Agency to keep everyone's attention on the Swain."

That did it.

Alma smiled sweetly at Christie. "I see you still have the handkerchief that goes with your outfit."

Christie looked at her waist. "What of it?" She twisted the

very green square of cloth; it bore traces of black smears.

Alma smiled again. "Nothing."

Christie pointed at Daphne. "*Mrs. Bickers* doesn't have hers."

Alma put her arm around Daphne's shoulders. "Don't worry, dear. We know you're not involved. Callie, go see the caterer about that barbecue sauce."

As I turned to leave I heard Christie say testily, "Pardon me, but is *this* the time to worry about getting a recipe?"

I found the caterer's crew chief in the kitchen. He was so thrilled that the cause of death was murder and not accidental food poisoning that he cheerfully gave me his list of ingredients. They included pretty much everything in the kitchen: vinegar, ketchup, mustard, molasses, corn syrup, garlic, sugar, anchovies, lemon, soybean oil, salt, and every spice I'd ever heard of.

As usual, Alma was right. Davis wasn't clutching Daphne's handkerchief. And he didn't use it to wipe his hands either.

But that left a lot of folks with motive. The judge, who had been busy eradicating some kind of sauce from her hands in the restroom; Dorothy, whose medical training might have given her that tidy method of murder; Quarles—he'd just defended a mob hit man, who

might have shared some tricks of the trade; or even Christie, who could have picked up the murder technique from her abbreviated forensics studies. Maybe the Swain had decided his defense team was inadequate. But if so, why not just fire Davis? And Christie was going to marry him. The list of possibilities was probably long enough without those two.

I found Alma and reviewed my notes with her. Alma has a talent for taking my jumbled scribbblings and finding what she needs.

She gave me back my notebook. "Well, we know who did it," she said, "but I don't know how to prove it."

Suddenly I remembered why the murder weapon looked familiar.

I found the small pantry that had been converted into a makeshift darkroom for the photographer, and lo and behold, there was our suspect rifling through the developed prints.

"No need to keep looking, Christie. We already have the print that shows your hair pinned up around the murder weapon. At first I thought it was a comb, but you probably should have kept it neutral. That weird green color—"

She whirled around to face me. "I don't know what you're

talking about. I'm just trying to find a last picture of my darling Davis."

"Sure. I don't understand entirely why you killed him, but I think it has to do with your being Charles LeeSmith's lover since college."

It was a shot in the dark that didn't exactly work.

"Charles? Oh, please! You *are* nuts! I loved Davis."

She *might* have broken down and confessed—you don't know unless you try. "No, I'm not. You claimed you couldn't have known each other in school because of the age difference, but LeeSmith was in the service before college so that narrows the gap considerably. And you both remembered some football score from back then. You were the mystery woman in his life. But why keep it a secret after he got his divorce?"

The ice woman melted a little. "By that time Davis was in love with me, and Charlie was in trouble. We decided I could keep a better eye on his defense if we kept it quiet. But somehow Davis found out. I thought he was going to throw the case by going before that old judge who presumes no one is ever innocent. It's true that now Davis's death will help get the case postponed long enough that Maxi can preside. Charlie has padded Her Honor's pocket in

the past, so that will help us. But none of this proves that either Charlie or I killed Davis."

Christie had several photographs in her hand. She looked down at them absent-mindedly. "Wait, here's that picture! You don't have it."

Okay, it was a risky bluff.

"It doesn't matter. The handkerchiefs gave you away, too. Alma realized that the cloth in Davis's hand couldn't be Daphne's because both Davis and Daphne were very allergic to any fish. Daphne knew the barbecue sauce had anchovies in it and would never have touched it. But I saw you eating a barbecued rib. That hanky you have there isn't yours. It has black mascara and green eyeshadow stains on it, but you wear no makeup. We can prove that those stains are Daphne's from when she cried earlier tonight. I think Davis grabbed your hanky in the struggle. You swiped that one from Daphne when you and she were bouncing around in the restroom later. I couldn't understand then why you kept showing her, but it was to get that cloth without her noticing."

"This is all circumstantial. You can't prove a thing."

What the heck. I'd go ahead and burst her little bubble.

"Except for one really big boo-boo. Earlier, in front of Lieutenant Suggs and lots of others, you accused Daphne of stabbing Davis. The body was found lying face up. When it was put back in that position, before anyone else could have seen it, no one knew how he was murdered except the police, Alma, me, and the murderer."

Just before Lieutenant Suggs led the litigator-cum-defendant away, Alma asked her, "Why did you stage that call with the psychic?"

Christie Habersham looked confused for the first time. "I didn't fake anything. I really did get that number from the television."

I hated to ask. "You didn't set up that message about the murder?"

"No. It was just a bad coincidence that made Daffy hire you."

Uh-oh.

I'm sorry Rod Serling's gone. He'd have loved this moment.

FICTION

# Five Finger Exercise

Arthur Porges



Illustration by Steve Chalker

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/96

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**T**ell me, B-Cubed, Wisest of Women, just how could a ninety pound, frail little woman, with a broken right arm in a sling yet, strangle a big, beefy, two hundred twenty pound man, even if he's passed out cold, dead drunk at the time and lying on a sofa? I might add for what it's worth that her injury resulted from a savage beating, the latest in a series administered by her husband, a disgusting swine now deceased, thanks to her—I think, but can't yet prove. One Charlie Hoffman, a fine specimen of macho brute."

The woman in the big armchair, amply filled by her tall, lanky form, smiled at the semifacetious query, so typical of her detective friend. She looked, Tom Rodgers thought, not for the first time, a bit like Janet Reno except for her oddly round and pretty face, which gave her an appealingly girlish appearance.

When she replied, her contralto voice was full of music, accentuated by a slight British accent, but he knew that if she was sufficiently provoked by arrogance, stupidity, or both, it could quickly acquire a steely edge.

"I'm not sure why you're so anxious to nail the poor woman, since her late husband seems to have had it coming in spades. But that aside, how do you know he was actually strangled?"

"Dr. Perez—he's the coroner as you'll recall, a good man—says so, and it was pretty obvious from the get-go. I don't have to instruct you of all people. The discolored, bluish face, bulging eyes, just as if he'd been hanged, in fact."

"Perhaps he was."

"No way," Rodgers assured her. "There are no rope burns or marks from a knot on his neck. It's pretty normal except for being as thick as a fireplug and none too clean. In addition to being a sadistic bully, he was a dirty pig in his personal habits. And we couldn't find any sort of a hook, or a hole where one had been and was removed," he added. "Beyond all that, she couldn't possibly have lifted him up to such a hook, moving him up and back from the couch. It would be rough even for me, and I outweigh her by at least fifty pounds and am in better shape." He gave her a half smile. "Which is why I'm here to pick your remarkable brain once again."

Elizabeth—Betty—Buffington Blake, who initialed documents B3 and was consequently known to her few intimates by the nickname B-Cubed, one well suited to a near genius who was highly qualified in math and several sciences via Oxford University and M.I.T., returned his smile, and said, "You overrate me as usual, but I don't



knock it; not a modest bone in my body." After a fifteen year university stint teaching mathematics, she had somehow gravitated into acting as a crime consultant, thanks both to her training in science and what she called her Theatre of the Mind, a mental feat of imagination that enabled her to discern motives and methods by a process of imaginative visualization. She often asserted that it was just a matter of plausible inferences from solid facts. Sherlock Holmes would have agreed.

Now she said, "I wonder why, in the circumstances, you suspect her at all. Are there no better suspects? And why do you want to convict so obvious a victim herself?"

"I have to suspect her, first because of motive; nobody else had one. Like so many wife-beaters, Hoffman was well-liked by his peers, to whom he was a hail-fellow-well-met, a genial buyer of drinks, a jolly companion at beer guzzling and haw-hawing at dirty jokes. And as to wanting to convict, I don't really, but it's my job, the chief is on my back, and I don't like murder, especially of a helpless man however deserving. Finally, there's nobody else because she didn't have anybody; no contacts, literally. Like most battered wives, she was isolated both by her psychology and her husband's behavior. Too terrified to run, as is usually the case. Why in hell don't such women leave? Answer, they just can't, period. But you know all that, I'm sure."

She was silent for a while, and he wisely kept his peace, sure she was implementing her Theatre of the Mind. Then her wide-set hazel eyes turned to him, and she said, "Two things."

"Which are?"

"She could use soft cloth, like a scarf; that wouldn't mark the neck much."

His response was quick. "Still, to tighten it enough with one hand—I can't buy it. And the second?"

"Not so fast. What about the Spanish Windlass approach?"

"The what?"

"You put a stick, anything slender and strong, under the scarf and rotate it until the cloth tightens enough to compress the carotid artery. It wouldn't take much strength—there's a big mechanical advantage, as an engineer would put it."

"That's a thought," he admitted. "But there'd be a knot, wouldn't there, and that would leave a purple or bluish spot. His neck didn't show a thing, Perez says."

"So that's out, I agree. All right, what about a pillow over his face? That doesn't take much muscle."

"Again, the coroner shot me down on that. It's good only for feeble or debilitated people. A husky guy like Hoffman, even when semi-conscious, would fight like hell against suffocation. But Perez also says there's a difference, not obvious but clear, between death by strangulation and with a pillow. No gruesome details, but tongue protruding and such. No pillow, B-Cubed, sorry."

"Well, you've done your homework." Then, after another pause, "Are you certain she had no contacts?"

"Yes, except for occasional visits to her GP. But he's over sixty-five and a small guy. Besides, I can't see him as an accomplice in a killing."

"What was he treating her for?"

"I don't know, but I'll find out for you, even if I don't see the relevance. I did notice she seemed to have a bit of asthma. In any case, I've a dossier of sorts on the case, and I'll get it to you tomorrow with the medical stuff. Okay?" And with another smile and a wave of his hand, he left.

The next morning, huddled in the big armchair she thought of as her Thinking Chair, she went through the all-too-slender folder from Rodgers. After an hour her Theatre of the Mind was still dark, empty of performers. Then she came to the medical data, and the curtain rose, and she phoned the detective.

"Whatcha got?" he asked eagerly as soon as he heard her voice.

"First," she chided him, "how did you get the medical information? Isn't that supposed to be strictly confidential?"

"Yes," he said, "it is. But Dr. Moran is very anxious to help her, and I convinced him, honestly I assure you, that he might be just as likely to clear as convict her, and that her medical file could be crucial. He even suggested, so help me, that we should plead PMS to get her off."

"If he's so concerned, why didn't the man blow the whistle on Hoffman and call the cops?"

"She wouldn't let him. Said she'd refuse to testify. You know the pattern; battered woman won't run, won't testify. No self-esteem, no place to hide. But don't keep me hanging."

"Relax, here it is, and a brilliant method she found, too. I'm in awe of little Mrs. Hoffman."

"B-Cubed, if you don't get to the point—"



"She had high blood pressure, no wonder under the circumstances. I mean really high, dangerous, often two fifty over one thirty."

"So?"

"She had her own equipment to keep tabs on it. Do you know how BP is measured?"

"Of course. There's an inflatable cuff—" He broke off suddenly, gulped, and exclaimed, "I'll be damned."

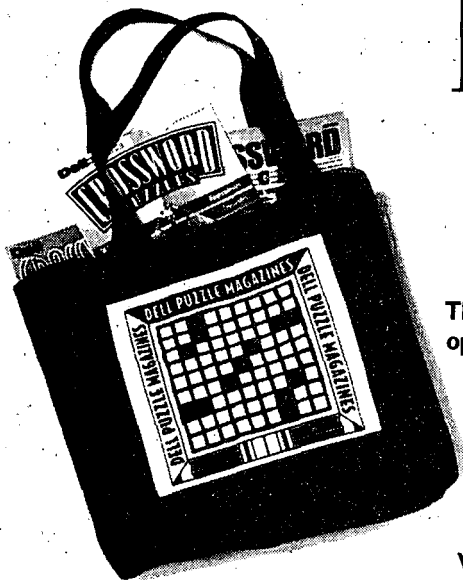
"Exactly. She just put the cuff around his neck, where it locks to itself with Velcro, and pumped it up. Takes no strength at all, and the cuff wouldn't leave any marks to speak of; it's wide and fairly soft but inflates enough to compress the carotid, although that takes a few more pumps than on the arm, I suppose."

"B-Cubed," Rodgers said happily, "you're a treasure!"

"Thanks," she replied. "But the real credit goes to Mrs. Hoffman. In fact," she added, and he could visualize her smile, able to charm the early, unregenerate Scrooge into tripling Bob Cratchit's salary, "you might call her performance the ultimate five finger exercise."

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FICTION

# SEARCH AND RESCUE

Lynda Lyons



Illustration by Richard Loehle

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 3/96

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“**Y**ou gotta hear this. C’mon, bring your pad thing.” Tony called it a pad thing ‘cause I didn’t know how to take dictation and he didn’t know how to give it.

I grabbed the notebook I’d been using to make out my grocery list, slid my feet into my shoes, and followed him into his office, hoping this wouldn’t take long.

Mrs. Crenshaw, the eleven o’clock I’d sent in to him a half hour earlier, was sitting with her back to me. I pulled the plastic chair beside her away a few inches so she wouldn’t be able to see the scribble I’d produce if Tony really insisted I make like there was a reason I was in the room.

“So, you were sayin’, Mrs. Crenshaw?” He was back behind his desk, folding his fingers in front of him like a priest in a movie, a police captain, a P.I., I don’t know—somebody or something other than what he was: a Fourteenth Street lawyer who didn’t have another client coming in until Thursday.

“I was saying that I’m not a rich woman, but I could pay you something every week.”

I could vouch for the not-rich part. The heels of her shoes were worn. She was wearing those cheap nylons nobody wears except a woman who feels

naked without something on her legs.

“Like I says,” says Tony, “money itn’t the object at this here minute. We could be settin’ a precedent, you know. A legal precedent, what would be makin’ some real news.”

The man’s vocabulary might not be extensive, but his knack for propping it up with legalese could be effective.

“Mrs. Crenshaw,” he says to me with a look that tells me to listen up good, “gave up her kid for adoption when he was born, an’ now she wants to sue t’ get her rights back.”

I commenced looking out the window over his shoulder, no matter what his eyes were telling me. Ho-hum and yawn. So Tony’s gonna make a buck off this lady’s ancient history come full circle for a second thought. I’m thinking he’s even got a nerve, talking that precedent stuff. Such suits are yesterday’s news. Either Tony’s out of the loop or the Crenshaw woman hasn’t been watching the talk shows and Tone’s got himself a live one.

“No kidding,” I say, wondering, like I’ve done a million times before, why I’m sitting in this crummy office looking out this dirty window at this filthy city. It’s the nineties, for crying out loud, and I’m not even thirty years old. Most of my girlfriends

have got decent jobs uptown, babies, and/or husbands. I'm working for peanuts in a dead-end scene straight out of the fifties. Spending my days doing crossword puzzles, wondering why I don't have a cellular phone in my purse like every other career-oriented woman my age.

"Right." Tony's cool, listen-to-me voice draws me back. "Thing is, though, the hitch with this one is, we're suing the kid, not the parents. It's the boy we're goin' after, right?" He rechecks it with her with a raised eyebrow and grabs another look at me. He's trying to tell me something, but I obviously don't get it. He's dying to come out with it but apparently feels he can't.

It's not that I don't like Tony. He always makes sure I get paid even when his rent doesn't. "Okay." I try to help. "What info do I need, Mr. Palmarini?"

"We gotta set up the papers against the kid; get the address and stuff." His hands are still folded. He's excited. I'm getting curious.

Mrs. Crenshaw turns around in her chair. She's older than you'd think. I didn't notice on her way in, but she's an old forty at the least.

"He lives at 2143 Main." She's got a monotone that doesn't quit. This woman is wound up and popped already. Her eyes—gray, faded—are scarred by

some old wounds. "The name they gave him is Michael. Michael McKinley."

"Stevie to you, huh, Mrs. Crenshaw? Stephen Allen Crenshaw."

I'd written down what she said, but I couldn't help but steal a peek at Tony. I'd heard that voice from him before. Soft. He felt sorry for this woman. Uh-oh, I thought. Something creepy was coming up. The new parents were abusing the boy or the kid was sick . . .

"His father's name was Allen," Mrs. Crenshaw said. "Mr. Crenshaw's father was named Stephen, so that's who we named the baby after. Stevie's father and paternal grandfather, both of whom are now deceased."

I stared at my pad. She'd been married to the guy. The kid was legit.

"Stevie—" Mrs. Crenshaw corrected herself without a beat—"Michael McKinley works at Dutton Brothers. He's the assistant manager."

I started blinking and couldn't stop. I knew Tony was waiting for me to look up at him, but I didn't. "So, uh, for the record—" I couldn't believe I was stumbling. I was usually pretty collected. "How old is this . . . Stevie?"

"Twenty-six," Mrs. Crenshaw answered.

\*

"This is gonna be one for the books."

If Tony said it even one more time, I wasn't gonna let him have another drop to drink, but sitting in Jasper's at one o'clock in the afternoon was almost worth it. The beer was nice and cold, and Tone was footing the bill. He was ebullient, Tony was. A word I'd learned from *Reader's Digest* just the night before.

"So, what does she want to prove? She's met him. He knows who she is. What's the deal?"

"He itn't what she was hopin' for." Tony sounded pleased. He was liking all the elements so far—the push-and-pull basics that jack up the fees of a case—and with the weird nature of this one, he even had a shot at attracting a reporter or two.

"Says she don't like the way he's turned out. Says they made 'im into somethin' she'd never have let happen."

I leapfrogged over the details. "Think you can pull it off?"

Tony looked disappointed. "Bobbi," he says, "how many times I gotta tell you? A case like this itn't about who wins and who don't."

"Legal precedent." I play it out. "She know that, though? Mrs. Crenshaw? That she hasn't got a chance in hell?"

"I don't think she's lookin' for one," Tony says, softer'n I think

he means to, and again I'm surprised to hear that it matters.

Five to five and I'm on the way to where I most like to go. Shopping. Browsing or buying, it makes no difference to me. Dutton Brothers is one of the best: all menswear and accessories but nice stuff—the kind of suits Tony'd never have the good sense to buy even if he could afford to. He's at the courthouse, "getting the papers," he says but I know better. He's checking with his cronies, feeling them out about what they'd do next so he can do the same. He's not stupid, Tony isn't, but he's still learning. I've seen him do things right, but that doesn't mean he's got it down pat.

The men's store is big, with high ceilings. The carpet is thick, and there's chimes coming from an elevator in the back. The salesmen all have that clone look common to better men's stores. Every healthy hair in place, slim and haughty looking. That doesn't bother me, though. I know they're just working for a living, like me.

I head for the suits, the ones in the lit inset in the back, knowing they're going to sport the high price tags. I stroke one sleeve and feel a drone at my elbow right away, figuring out his approach.

"Excellent taste," he says, but

I'm noticing how good he smells. He doesn't clash with the store's moneyed scent, but he doesn't blend, either. I like men that smell good, or maybe I should say my knees do.

"Time for a new suit?"

"I keep telling him." I sneak a peek, but this goodlookin' guy's naturally sable skin tells me he's probably not the offspring of Mrs. Blue-eyed Crenshaw.

"Mike McKinley still working here?" I asked.

"Sure. He's around somewhere." He hesitates, hanging on to his commission. "You want to see him?"

"He sold my boyfriend his favorite suit." Even in fiction I'm not willing to marry myself off yet.

I frown and finger suit jackets, turning my head this way and that, waiting for my delivery.

The "Can I be of help?" comes without a warning "Ahem," but I'm in the routine far enough already that I just turn, falling in without a blink.

"I'm looking for something in navy."

"Business or formal?" His eyes are Crenshaw's all right, with a second generation gift of brighter blue.

"Business. He's an architect." I'd always wanted to date one of those.

"I see," Michael McKinley says. "Size?"

I give him Tony's, which I happened to notice on the way back from the cleaners one day, and follow where McKinley heads, catty-cornered from where I'd been. He's dressed in a black suit himself, same color as his hair. The back of his neck is tanned. From habit I notice he's got no wedding ring. No earring either, even though he has the ears for it. I've seen his bloodline, which is middle class at best, but either his adoptive parents are highbrow or it's the status of the store itself, because he reeks ritzy. It's not just the goods he's wearing, tailored down to the cufflinked sleeves, it's the walk and talk and mannerisms as well. I remember he's got a degree in business from one of the better schools.

He pulls a suit and presents it to me without a word. His confidence is a given. He's got long lashes and one of those noses a girlfriend of mine paid a fortune for.

"You like it?" I ask.

My jumpstart works. He doesn't smile, but the blue flickers. "It's functional," he says. "He'll like it."

"But do I like it?" I persist.

The smile's headed for his mouth.

"I don't know," he says. "Do you?"



I think about Tony, going over and over it in my ear before I take off, knowing this is not what he had in mind. I'm checking the guy out all right, and up close at that, but I try to remember some of what Mrs. Crenshaw said about Stevie, repeated via Tone. On the surface it'd be easy to figure why this smooth guy'd want no complications. This was not a boy'd be lookin' for his long-lost mom.

Strangely enough, though, it's McKinley's own straight-on gaze that reminds me there's more here than meets the eye. Something's in there the old lady didn't want to see end up in there. My curiosity now wants to know what.

"I don't know," I demur, knowing he's shown me his best.

"I have a shipment coming in Friday."

"Take my number," I say. "Call me if you come up with something you think I'd want."

He pulls a pad and pen out of his inside pocket, without taking his eyes off of me.

I give him my home telephone number. "Bobbi," I clarify. "No e."

**T**ony's pissed. "You gotta date with this guy?"

I shrug. "He called. I told you. Didn't even mention the suits."

"Whaddya wanna go on a date

with this guy for? You went there on business."

"So it's a business date." The situation strikes me as funny. First he wants me to play detective to get a look, now he's peeved at what a good look I'll be getting.

"You never heard a conflict of interest before?"

"He's not gonna know me from nobody. Since when'd I ever go to court with you?" I pour more coffee in his cup. "Sides, think of what I might be able to find out that could help you with your case."

"And if somebody finds out about you an' him?"

"I'm not gonna marry the guy, Tone. We're just gonna have dinner tonight. How else am I ever gonna see the inside of the Peacock Room?"

He doesn't like that one. Once—before a hefty check from a client bounced—he'd promised to take me to the Peacock Room to celebrate the case he'd won.

"It'll be weeks before you go to trial with this thing. By then he'll have forgotten ever meeting me." I put sugar in the coffee, and cream, just the way he likes it, satin-beige and sweet enough to make your teeth hurt. "Okay? It's no big deal." I wave at the law books spread out all over his desk. "Anything you want me to do?"

"Nah. Just hold my calls."

Some joke. "Sure, Tone," I agree, serious-sounding as can be. I did feel kinda bad about the Peacock slam.

I went back to my own desk and started making a list of the clothes I had that might be appropriate for the best restaurant in town.

Michael was wearing a baby-blue silk shirt and a black silk tie. The peachy number I'd settled on was perfect for the elegant old hotel's dining room. The tiny table between us prevented me from crossing my legs, but I wasn't uncomfortable—we weren't near the kitchen or stuffed into a side booth. I liked the pretty-people status they'd given us, though I wasn't sure it wasn't him they were dressing up the room with. He was something. Not the most verbose guy I'd ever had dinner with, but the view across from me made up for that.

I shrugged off my job as "a little office downtown," and concentrated on being enigmatic without giving him the impression I was withholding. He didn't seem to mind. He ate his steak rare, slicing off small triangular sections which he then incised perfectly with his fork. I was impressed. His table manners were several notches above what I was used to.

I intimated an invented dis-

tance from my own family, hoping to inspire him into not assuming he was alone if he had any problems in the parental department. He said his father was a doctor, his mother—a mother. He didn't seem to have anything else to say about the people who'd given him an insider's look at the good life.

I went along with more wine after dinner, hoping that would lead us to new territory. I tried prompting him by talking about boyfriends, past and present—which worked so well he told me all about a coed named Carin, a stewardess named Susanne, and Barbie the bitch. His gloss and glisten warmed on the subject. I swerved us to college roommates. He'd had a couple of losers. Bosses. His current one was only half the bastard his last had been. Cars. His father, the doctor, had bought him his first Porsche. And his second. He was a little spoiled this guy, a tad self-absorbed.

He saw me to my curb just before midnight with a minikiss. My choice. He didn't walk me upstairs.

The next morning a note on Tony's wiped-clean desk told me he was at the courthouse initiating "the papers." I made coffee for myself and drank it at his desk, staring out his window

at the gloomy day. I couldn't help feeling that things suddenly weren't going right and it was somehow my fault. This could have been Tony's big break, but my Della Street imitation had muddled the waters. I didn't have anything to report except that M. McKinley had expensive tastes in clothes, food, and cars. I was on the outside looking in—I didn't know what the problem was that Crenshaw had with her wayward, according to her, son, but I knew just how sticky all this could get for a man like him to see his carefully constructed life unraveled. Which is exactly what his ex-mother, Tony, and me were going to do. Nobody who walks into a courtroom ever walks out the same person.

I stared out that grimy window and tried to do some serious thinking. What would make a woman go to all the trouble this one was getting ready to go through? What was it about how her kid had turned out that was worth all the aggravation she'd be causing herself and, she had to know it, him? Was he a sex maniac? A serial killer? An atheist? Did he chop up people and bury 'em in his basement? Was there a printing press down there where he made up hate pamphlets, like the kind you see guys handing out on street cor-

ners on the weekend? What had I missed?

I called Tony about eleven o'clock. "How'd it go?" I asked. "You get the papers filed?"

"Right." He sounded wired and spent the next ten minutes filling me in on every last detail—the statutes he'd talked with so-and-so, lunch planned with a lawyer buddy, how much time he'd put in waiting for clerks. I "uh-huhed" him until he wound down enough for me to ask him if I could talk for a minute.

He said, "Sure," and I said, "Hey, Tone, tell me what you were gonna tell me the other day. About this guy. What his problem is, according to her."

He says, calm and cool, "How was your date, by the way?"

I go, "Fine. Nothing much there," and add, "Too bad" in case he doesn't understand I'm telling him I've got nothing to tell him. "So, what's the big deal anyway?"

"It's not like that," he says. "He didn't rob a bank or nuthin'."

"Goodlooking guy."

"I seen a picture."

"Not a cheap date."

"He lives at home. He can afford it."

"Oh, really?" This hadn't occurred to me, but it didn't mean all that much. Statistics say more guys than ever are living

at home longer, saving up, having a good time, just keeping their feet dry as long as they can.

"Yeah, really."

"So, what?" His sarcasm annoys me.

"I was on my own at eighteen."

"And?"

"Kid like that, don't know how to take care of himself when he finally gets out there."

"That what's got her going?" I asked, nasty. I know Tony put himself through school, worked double-up jobs to do it without a father around to pitch in. Still—apples and oranges. I was betting Michael McKinley's growing-up address was on the other side of the tracks from Tony's mom's house. Life is a lot of things, but everybody knows one of 'em isn't fair.

"Maybe. He has it easy."

I was blinking again, like I'd done when I'd gotten a whiff of the "kid's" age that first time. "So?" I ask, straight out. "What exactly are we talking about here, Tony? What exactly is it that his birth mother is so shook about?"

There was this little beat of silence on the other end of the phone. I knew Tony wanted to hang up. He could have, but he didn't. He never had.

"He's shallow."

I pressed the phone harder

against my ear to hear better. "What?"

"She says he's superficial."

The silence was coming from my end now.

"I told you he didn't rob any banks."

"Tone," I said, honestly horrified, "what the hell are you doing, messin' with this? This woman is looney!"

"She's makin' a statement."

"By trying to get custody of a twenty-six-year-old man?"

"A statement, Bobbi," he repeated. "She didn't come in the office lookin' for custody. That was my idea—strategy. I figured this was the best way for us to get the case into court, other than outright suing for abuse or neglect, which'll get tossed out too fast."

"So she's going after him?"

"By putting this through the system, she's gonna be sayin' what she wants to say to him loud and clear."

"You're gonna be laughed out of court, Tony. What's the matter with you?"

"It's the only way."

"The only way to what?" My voice was more shrill than it should have been. He'd really knocked me for a loop. "For you to make a few lousy bucks?"

"For Stevie to know his mom did what she had to do 'cause she loved him," Tony said.

\*

When I got back from a long lunch, I was hoping Tony would be there so we could have this out in person, but what I wasn't ready for was Mrs. Crenshaw waiting outside the glass-windowed door to the office.

"Sorry I'm late, I was at lunch," I say as I'm fumbling with the keys, but she tells me it doesn't matter, she's just here to give Mr. Palmarini his first installment payment. I let her in and get rid of my coat and hers, letting her assume she needs to wait for him—like Tony would know where the receipt book was—but I *want* her to hang around. I make coffee and check her out, verifying my first impression. She's not dirt poor, but she doesn't move in the same circles the McKinley family does.

"Got any other kids, Mrs. Crenshaw?" I finally ask.

She shakes her head no and takes the coffee I give her. "I never remarried," she offers a few minutes later, "after Mr. Crenshaw passed away."

"What'd he die of?" I ask, thinking Big C, Big H, sky-high cholesterol, or maybe just the stress of having a nut for a wife.

"Vietnam," she says. "Nineteen sixty-nine."

I pour a third cup, rattled, keeping my back to her while I

pour it into the pot like that's what I meant to do from the beginning.

"So long ago," she says like she's talking to herself. "I can hardly believe how long it's been."

"Yeah," I say. "I guess." I'm thinking about Tony's father, the guy with the crazy grin in the frame on Tony's office wall. 'Sixty-four, he'd told me once. Chopper crash while on something called a Search and Rescue. Same year he graduated and same year he got drafted, pregnant girlfriend or no.

"Mr. Palmarini's a nice young man." She shifts gears. "Very understanding."

I sat down at my desk, staring at the lady seated on the plastic couch Tony'd picked up somewhere cheap.

"I don't understand, Mrs. Crenshaw," I said straight out. "Why're you doing this to your kid? I know it's none of my business . . ." I lost my nerve. I hadn't meant to make her cry, but her eyes were filling up fast.

"Do you know how rarely I've heard that phrase in my life?" she asks. "My kid." It sounded reverent coming out of her mouth. The kind of tone most people reserve for talking about God or big sums of money.

"I hear it all the time, People use it every day, everywhere I go—my son, my boy, my child—

and I always wonder, do they ever get used to it? Do they know how precious it is? How lucky they are?"

I felt a lump clog my throat. I tried to picture her husband, a twenty-year-old probably, but the only face I could bring to mind was Tony's grinning dad.

"I used to go shopping for Stevie, after. I didn't buy anything, of course, but sometimes I'd go to the toy section, sometimes the boys' department. I'd always ask for help just so I could tell the clerk I was looking for something for my son. For a while I did it on Christmas and, later on, in the fall . . . school clothes, you know." Her voice trailed off. She wasn't looking at me, wasn't looking at anything. "But it became too hard. Once I was looking at one of those electric cars—the kind a child can drive up and down their driveway—and when I asked the saleswoman the price, she said, 'Oh, your son is such a lucky boy. Wait'll you see his face when you give this to him.' I started to cry, right there in the toy department. I should never have gone there on his birthday."

"Why'd you do it?" I was surprised to hear how tough my voice sounded. Blunt. Almost bullying—but like that was the *right* way to ask the question. The *kind* way.

"Everyone said I should."

There was a meekness beneath the flatness that hadn't come through before. Maybe an echo from the scared young girl who'd been making the decisions back then. "I was seventeen," she said. "When I got the news about Allen . . . everyone said I had to do what was best for the baby. Mr. Crenshaw, he got sick and . . . I didn't have a job . . . I didn't know what to do . . ." Her little puffs of words were breaking my heart, the same one I'd thought was so hard just a minute ago.

"So you came looking for the baby," I pushed. "All these years later."

"I needed to know he'd been well cared for. That's all I needed to know. That's what I thought."

I wanted to get up from my chair and go sit beside her. I didn't.

"I needed to see what he looked like. If he . . . Allen." She finally picked up speed, leaving behind some of what had been holding her back, catching up with herself again finally. "We didn't know I was pregnant when he left—but we'd talked about what kind of a person we wanted to bring into this world." Her eyelashes fluttered at me like she was asking me something. Maybe if I understood. I thought I did, so I nodded. I had friends who worked

their butts off just to get their kids into the best schools—I figured it was all one and the same.

“But Michael McKinley wasn’t even curious about his father. Or me. Or *anything*. He just kept looking at his watch.”

I could see that. Assertive glances at the gold on his wrist, measuring the amount of time being wasted in the company of this irrelevant stranger.

“I could hardly get him to talk to me. When he did, I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.”

“Superficial,” Tone had quoted her as saying. What did that mean? He tossed a lot of money at his car? Looked in the mirror without seeing anything other than the cut of his hair or the lines of his suit? He spent more time in a gym than in conversation?

I wanted to believe that what this woman cared about was subjective—this particular lady’s own idealistic fantasy of what she’d dreamed her offspring should be to satisfy her commitment to a dead husband, a deceased marriage, a depleted life. I wanted to believe that, but I was remembering the way Michael McKinley had pet-named his former lovers—by profession: coed, stewardess, or stereotype: Barbie the bitch. How I’d admired his look, his table manners, his aura of self-

confidence, without ever once noticing assets that would have taken him from the droll category of “prospect” to that of an individual. He could quote headlines from CNN, but did he have any opinions of his own? Did he know what the word ebullient meant? More important, had he ever felt that way, about anything?

I wanted to ask her what she thought her statement would prove this late in the game, but Tony had already surmised, I could see too now, she probably wasn’t expecting much. She was linked to her kid—the separation of their lives didn’t mean much more than had the separation between her and her husband. She was aiming to pick up now where she figured the parents had left off. Her son surely didn’t want to hear anything she had to say, but she was going to fight for her right to say it, loud and clear. She’d jostle his genes through the courts if she had to, but she was gonna make him listen.

“Well,” I said, and Tony came in just then. He smiled when he saw her. His good face lit up, and I got that immediately. He liked her. Liked her a lot. She coulda been his mother, just like poor Allen coulda been his old man and bratty Michael coulda been him if Tone hadn’t been lucky enough to get what he’d got,



breaks or no—the kind of legacy that gave him something that would outlast good intentions. If his mother hadn't been a Mrs. Crenshaw, he might be uptown somewhere himself, in one of the highrise offices on his way to making partner and buying his third Porsche. No aggravation. No heart. No me.

"There's no rush, Mrs. Cren-

shaw," he says warmly, though I've got a stack of bills in my desk waiting to be paid. "Bobbi coulda billed you."

"Right," I say, opening my bottom drawer where the Windex is, thinking about that window in Tone's office and what I could do for it, at least from the inside. "There's plenty of time for that."

## **SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED":**

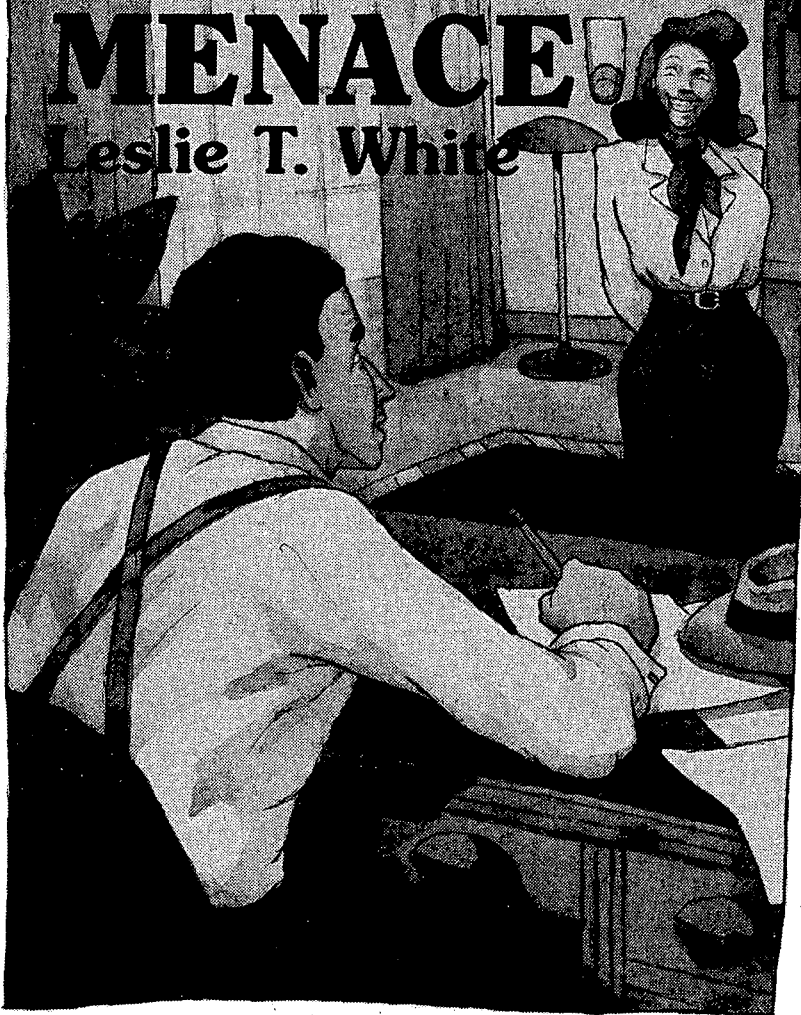
Silver is buried on Witch Island, pearls on Treachery Island, gold on Vulture Island, rubies on Skull Island, and emeralds on Underhand Island.

| PIRATE           | SHIP            | ISLAND    |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Awful Aubert     | <i>Jealousy</i> | Witch     |
| Butcher Bones    | <i>Infamous</i> | Treachery |
| Cutlass Cuthbert | <i>Ghastly</i>  | Vulture   |
| Dagger Dan       | <i>Horrible</i> | Skull     |
| Evil Evert       | <i>Furious</i>  | Underhand |

| PIRATE           | MERCHANT SHIP           | TREASURE |
|------------------|-------------------------|----------|
| Awful Aubert     | <i>Merry Marie</i>      | silver   |
| Butcher Bones    | <i>Lovely Laura</i>     | pearls   |
| Cutlass Cuthbert | <i>Naughty Nancy</i>    | gold     |
| Dagger Dan       | <i>Obliging Ophelia</i> | rubies   |
| Evil Evert       | <i>Pretty Paula</i>     | emeralds |

# MERCHANT OF MENACE

Leslie T. White



I am Simonizing the phaeton with one hand and reading a copy of *Film Flam* with the other when Missus Tristram Bel-Geddes flows out to the garage and tells me that B-G wants to see me in the library. I ankle over and find the boss sitting on the back of his neck.

"Hello, Jake," he says absently. He is fingering a telegram which has been badly torn and crumpled. "Have you ever been to Hollywood?"

"Not yet," I confess. "But—"

"Read this." And he shoves the telegram at me.

It says:

OFFER YOU FIFTEEN HUNDRED PER WEEK AND EXPENSES ON  
SIX WEEK OPTION CONTRACT TO COME TO HOLLYWOOD AND  
DO US AN ORIGINAL STORY ABOUT WAYWARD GIRLS ALONG  
LINES YOUR BOOK PASSION BURNS WHICH WAS STUPENDOUS  
STOP COME BY PLANE IMMEDIATELY STOP WIRE ACCEPTANCE.

HERMAN-PLATZBAUM,  
SUPER-COLOSSAL PICTURES, INC.  
HOLLYWOOD

"Oh boy! That's swell, B-G," I tell him. "Do we go?"

The boss wags his head. "Jake, I am too tired. I have just completed another book entitled *Semi-Virgin*—which, by the way, I know you will like—and I am pooped out. As you know, for the last six months I have planned a trip into the wilds of Canada after muskellunge. Jake, have you ever tackled a fighting muskellunge?"

"I do not care for hunting," I tell him with dignity, trying to cover up my disappointment.

B-G sighs. "Muskellunge is a fish, but never mind technicalities. The point is, Jake, I have made all plans. I have hired a guide and went so far as to promise my wife a trip to Europe, which she now refuses to cancel. That has cost me money, Jake."

"Well, fifteen hundred per is plenty of potatoes also," I remind him.

"That, Jake, is precisely the point. And because I need that fifteen hundred, I was for a time in a quandary. But the problem solved itself, and I have wired old Platzie my acceptance."

Even I are puzzled. "Then we *are* going, B-G?"

"Not *we*, Jake; you. After talking it over with my wife, we both

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agree that nature has moulded you for the job. My wife is very discerning, Jake."

"Perhaps I am dumb, B-G, but first you say—"

"It is all very simple," the boss explains, sitting on the back of his lap for a change. "How much am I paying you now?"

"Well, forty bucks a week, but last week you bummed back twenty to pay taxi fare for that straw blonde you took—"

"Quiet, Jake, quiet! Your voice carries, and I do not wish to disturb my wife with trivialities. Just put twenty onto your expense account. The point is: I shall pay you one hundred dollars a week and expenses to loaf around the best hotels in Hollywood for the term of six weeks. You will be Tristram Bel-Geddes, the novelist, while I will tackle the courageous muskellunge in the torrential streams of Canada, far from the fever of the cities, and thus restore my fading vigor. Jake, my young friend, how does that sound to you?"

"Screwy, B-G! Of course I would like to loaf around Hollywood; but while I like to read love stories and have been around until I am progressed past the bees and flowers stage, I cannot write what I know. Furthermore, you have already been to Hollywood twice before on these offers, and I would find myself arrested as an impersonator and impostor. Why, I cannot even write a decent letter, let alone a book."

Bel-Geddes smiles. "Even I cannot write a decent letter, Jake, and my critics frankly state that I cannot write a decent book. But we digress. The point is: you don't have to write to go to Hollywood. I have made two trips to Hollywood, and never have I been inside a studio. When you get there, you call the studio from your hotel. They tell you the big shot is in conference or in Europe or someplace, and to take it easy and they will call you. Then they forget you, except the treasurer who sends your check up to the hotel every Saturday. At the end of six weeks the check stops coming, so you go home."

I am dubious. "But suppose, B-G, that this Platzbaum guy should send for me—he will recognize I am not you."

"That is irrelevant and unprecedented," he insists. "No such coincidence has ever taken place. The very fact that they are paying so much dough and are in such a hurry to get me there proves definitely that they have no intention of using me."

"In the second place," he goes on, "I have never permitted myself to be photographed because my figure is not one to inspire romance

in the morons who read my books. Excuse me, Jake—I did not mean to include you in that remark. Nevertheless, as my wife frankly points out, you look more like the popular conception of a love-story writer than I do. You are young, tall, dark, and handsome in a virile sort of way. It is this hairless pate and sagging chest of mine that keeps me away from the cameras—to say nothing of these thick-lens spectacles.”

“But,” I press him, “suppose Platzie should ask for a story—what then?”

“If they should—now mind, Jake, they won’t—ask for a yarn, air-mail me a letter at once, and then stall while I grab a plane and come out to Hollywood.”

He sees I am weakening, so he keeps talking. “Why, Jake, I had a friend who went out there, and because they only paid him three hundred a week, they really asked him to do a story, so he bought a love-story magazine and copied the first yarn in the book. They changed it around so much the original author would have been ashamed to recognize it, which he couldn’t.

“Now that I have covered all the points,” he finishes up, “here is five hundred expense money, and the Glendale plane leaves in two hours. You will have to hurry. Don’t forget to write. Although my wife will be on her way to Europe, the cook will forward your letter. Goodbye, Jake, and remember—you are now custodian of the good name of Tristram Bel-Geddes.”

Well, for a while I have a case of the whips-and-jingles, but by the time the plane three-points at the Glendale airport, I am pretty well sold on the idea. It was a swell flight, and I pass the time reading the carbon copy of *Semi-Virgin*, which I am supposed to have just wrote. It certainly is a torrid yarn, and I am practically panting from the opening, in which the girl right away propositions the hero, until the end in which they stagger up the aisle to the smell of orange blossoms.

All along I cannot see how it can possibly come out right. But virtue triumphs in the good old Bel-Geddes style. I am more than proud to have wrote such a novel, so I heartily recommend it to the little redheaded stewardess, who it turns out is one of my public. To my surprise she produces a well-worn copy of *Love for Rent*, an early Bel-Geddes thriller, and asks me to autograph it.

This being the first time I take up forgery, I am naturally a little nervous, and for a moment I cannot remember whether Bel-Geddes has two d’s or just one. I ask the redhead does she remember, but

she thinks I am kidding, so it is all right. Along with a swell auto-graph, I jot down my hotel number and ask her will she come out some night and look up some atmosphere with me. She promises to if her husband, who is a railway brakeman, goes out of town before her next flight.

Well, I go to the Hollywood-Roosevelt, and it is a swell kennel. A suite has already been reserved for me, and I am beginning to know I will like this job although there is not much chance of padding my expense account because most of the bills will be charged direct to the studios.

I am still unpacking my bags when the phone rings. I have a bad minute or so, but it turns out to be only the little redhead from the plane. Her husband is out on his run, and will I take her some-place? I will, naturally, but for a moment I am nonplussed, not knowing Hollywood. Suddenly I remember that all the big shots go to Malibu Beach, so I tell her to ferry over to the hotel and I will take her places.

After I have hanged up, I remember that Bel-Geddes has told me to call the studio as soon as I hit town so our paycheck will start immediately. I call Super-Colossal, just as a formality, and get Mr. Platzbaum's secretary on the wire.

"Oh, Mr. Bel-Geddes!" she chortles. "I am very glad to hear your voice, for I have been waiting for you to call. I am very sorry to tell you that Mr. Platzbaum is in story conference right now—"

Ah! I think smugly, my boss knows his onions.

"But," the girl goes on, "he is terribly anxious to get you started on the new picture. Can I send a car for you in an hour, Mr. Bel-Geddes?"

"Better make it two hours," I tell her, and hang up.

Now I am in a pretty mess. I can see, after sitting around for a long time, that there is nothing to do but call the boss up and tell him his muskellunge hunt is off, and so is my six weeks' vacation. I put in a long distance call and sit on the bed to wait.

After a long time the phone rings and I grab for it.

"Hello, boss—" I begin, before I find it is only the clerk in the lobby telling me the redhead is waiting downstairs and should she come up.

"Tell her I am in a story conference and do not expect to be back for six weeks," I barge, and hang up.

The next time the phone jangles, it is the long distance operator.



"The party you were calling," she says, "is out of town and cannot be reached for approximately six weeks. Will anyone else do?"

"I am afraid not," I admit, and prong the receiver.

It rings right back in my face, so I get another surge of hope.

"The car from Super-Colossal Studios is waiting, Mr. Bel-Geddes," announces the admiral at the front door.

Well, this guy Herman Platzbaum is built close to the ground with a slice out of his hair like he has been scalped and saucer lips like a Ubangi. He is very happy to see me.

"Welcome! Welcome!" he says, pumping my arm like he hopes to get water. "We have been waiting for you. I saw the tests of your Broadway act. By the way, what did you say your name was?"

"You must be mistaken," I tell him frankly. "I am not an actor, I am a writer. The name, such as it is, is Bel-Geddes."

Platzbaum beats his lips together and laughs. "Ha! Of course! Your book *Romeo and Juliet* made M.G.M. a lot of money."

"I hate to keep contradicting you," I assure him, "but I did not write *Romeo and Juliet*."

"Ha! You are too modest. No one would know if you did not tell them. But we want something from you along the same lines, a story about wayward girls and the pitfalls, et cetera, see? Bring in the pitfalls of white slavery and all that. Something hot, see? Something new what's never been done. Warners, M.G.M., and Paramount are doing stories along this line, too. We got to hurry and get into production."

"I get it—with something original?"

"Exactly! Original—only keep it along the same lines as them. Here's the idea in a nutshell. While we want the whole picture of the white-slave racket, we gotta watch the Hays office. You're the writer, so you'll know how to handle it. We can't come out and mention white slavery, see? And maybe you'd better not put any bad girls in it. And don't forget the love interest."

"That should be a cinch," I tell him sarcastically.

"I knew you could do it, Gel-Beddes. Make it plenty hot, but keep it moral, see? Remember the slogan of Super-Colossal: Fit for All the Family from Baby Up to Granny!"

"Does the slogan from baby to Granny include the cat, too?"

"I wouldn't want you should put anything in offensive to cats," Platzie says soberly. "Somebody in the audience might like cats. Everybody loves a lover, you know, Ged-Belles."

"The name is Bed-Gelles, I mean Bel-Geddes—damn it! You got



even me confused!" I am getting sore; then I get a brilliant hunch. "Listen, Mr. Platzbaum, I will dash off this yarn in nothing flat, but I have a very peculiar way of writing. I crave the odor of muskellunge around me; it is like a drug. So, if you don't mind, I will go up into the woods where there is muskellunge around me and tear off this story for you."

"Oh, that will not be necessary," he says, shaking his head. "We need you on the lot in case there is changes in the idea. And anyhow, I can arrange everything right here for you." He rings for his secretary, and when she pops her head in the door, he says, "Baby, arrange a nice office for Mr. Del-Bladdes right away. An' lissen, didn't we use a muskellunge in that last B production, *Hell in Your Arms*?"

"That was *Heaven in Your Arms*, Mr. Platzbaum," this baby corrects him. "And it weren't no muskellunge, it was a musk-ox."

"Don't be so damn technical!" Platzie yells. "Ain't it got a smell like anything else? Have it put in his office at once." To me he says: "Now lemme have an outline of what the story is all about as sooner as possible. You know, somethin' about four or five pages so I can okay it. Remember the slogan of Super-Colossal. And we want you should be very happy here. Good day, Mr. Ded-Belles."

I followed Miss Baby out of the office. In the hall, I say: "Young lady, while you are looking up an office, I think I shall go down the street to a doctor. I may even go back to my hotel for a while."

"Oh, but that is unnecessary." She smiles at me. "Doubtless you will take a few days to get settled. But we have a super-excellent doctor on the lot, and as soon as I put you in an office, I shall have him visit you. You must not feel nervous over your first assignment, although most writers do."

So she leads me to a swell little office on a patio. It is made up to look like what Hollywood thinks is Spanish. The office itself is super-modern, with chairs and tables which was evidently made by a plumber instead of a carpenter because they have pipe legs.

"Now," this baby goes on, "there are, of course, certain rules. You must not leave the lot without permission, and you are expected to produce a reasonable amount of work. But take it easy for a few days, and if you want anything, I think perhaps I can supply it."

"I am sure you could," I tell her, not meaning any pun. "And skip the doctor."

Well, she goes out. I dig up pencil and paper and start to break

the bad news to Bel-Geddes in a long letter of woe. I am just going good on the tenth page when the door opens and a dame walks in.

Now, I am by nature courteous, so I look up and smile. I think it is a star searching for her dressing room because she looks like a twin of Betty Grable, or maybe a close first cousin to Myrna Loy. She gives me a swell smile, the kind that sort of explodes, and when it stops quivering, she holds the tip of her tongue between the pearliest teeth.

"Hello, darling," she beams. "I finally got here. Ready for me?"

Much as I have been around, even I are nonplussed, but only temporary. So this is Hollywood! Boy! I think to myself. Aloud, I say, "Just what is expected of me?"

"Oh, am I lucky," she explodes again. "I practically had to murder half the girls in the stenographic department for the job of being your secretary. I won."

"You lost," I tell her with emphasis. "I am sorry, but I have no use for a secretary. I do not want one."

"But you've got to have one, honey. It's the custom. Every writer at Super-Colossal has a secretary. It even says so in your contract."

Although this conversation is painful to me, I am firm. I know it will be fatal if I have a spy in my midst.

"Now, lissen, lady. It is my contract, and I do not want a secretary. I do all my own writing, and I want to be alone."

At that her smile warps a little to the starboard. "You and Garbo, darling. Sorry, but you've got me whether you like it or not. I have a widowed mother and seven tiny children, or maybe eight, and I think it is going to be a hard winter. If you throw me out, the big boss will think I have no appeal, and all girls in Hollywood must have appeal. No, darling, I am sorry, but you have luckily got a clever secretary." And with that she walks into a little alcove off the main office and sits herself down in front of the typewriter.

Well, I cannot wrassle her out, so I turn my back and try to finish my letter to B-G. I tell him the whole ghastly story about Platzie being already suspicious and putting a spy in the office. And then I try to find a dictionary.

Immediately the girl runs into the room and demands to know what I am looking for and I tell her a dictionary.

"That is part of my service," she tells me with a smile. "What word is it you wish to spell?"

"I do not wish to spell anything," I growl. "I wish to know if it is illegal to impersonate anybody in California."

"What you want is a Penal Code, honey. Super-Colossal maintains a research department, however, and I shall get this information from them." So she gets on the phone and in a minute she calls to me. "Darling, they wish to know do you mean receiving money by the impersonation?"

I tell her yes, and after another pause, she hangs up and gives it to me.

"Yes, honey, it is a felony falsely to impersonate another character for fraudulent purposes in California; in other words, a penitentiary offense. That should make a swell angle for a story, darling. M.G.M. made a picture like that last year."

Well, I put all that in the letter to B-G, telling him frankly that we will both be in prison, with or without muskellunge, if he does not hurry out here and get in character. Then I seal up the letter and reach for my hat.

"I am going to mail a letter," I tell this dame.

"Oh, but you can't leave the lot," she says, jumping up. "I will mail it through the studio mailing department, and it will get out nearly half a day sooner than if you drop it in a corner box. Give it to me." And she practically hijacks the letter out of my hand.

"Send it airmail, special delivery, and register it," I call after her. "It is important."

That night I worry very hard, giving especial thought to what a tough place San Quentin penitentiary is. I am on pins and needles until the boss gets my letter because I can see that we will probably both be working in the prison jute mill.

By the time I get to the office, I am glum and getting glummer. This secretary is sitting there like a visible conscience, and although she gives me a five carat, thousand-volt smile, I do not speak except to ask did she sure mail my letter. She hands me the registering receipt which proves it.

After a while, I am thinking hard and I remember what B-G told me about his friend what copied a story out of a book and nobody cared. So at noon when I go to lunch I buy a magazine of love stories and start to read them until I find something like Platzbaum wanted.

While I am thus busy, Platzie's nifty secretary calls.

"Mr. Bel-Geddes, will you please submit at once a possible title for a B production now called *Dealer in Death*."

"Me? How would I know about the title? What's the picture all about?"

"I wouldn't know for sure," Miss Baby says. "I think it's a horse opera. But don't count on it. 'Bye."

Now while I hate to talk to her, I am stuck, so I look at my secretary in the alcove. "Hey, you, what's your name?"

"Gwen."

"Please do not become familiar," I warn her. "What is your last name, miss?"

She blushes. "Oh, but nobody ever uses last names in Hollywood!" she insists. "It isn't done, that's all."

"Well, what am I supposed to call you in Hollywood?"

"You can call me honey, darling, toots, or just Gwen. And you don't have to be so snooty and fresh about it. It is a custom, nothing more."

"Well, what's a horse opera?"

"No, it's not an animal musical, it is a Western. You know, cowboys and a mortgage and some shooting. It is full of menace. Why?"

"Platzie wants a title for a picture which has already got a title named *Dealer in Death*. What is this—a gag?"

"Oh dearie, no. Everybody in the writers' department is asked to think of titles. The chosen title wins a hundred dollar bonus."

I do not have time to worry about bonuses. "Well, t'hell with Platzbaum!" I declare. "I am a dealer in love, not a merchant of menace."

"O-o-oh!" she squeals. "You got something, darling!" And before I can stop her, she telephones the Platzbaum unit.

"This is Mr. Bel-Geddes' office," she purrs. "Mr. Bel-Geddes submits—and spell it right for the first time, angel—*Merchant of Menace* for that B production which has been worrying Mr. Platzbaum."

After she hangs up, she jolts me with a thousand-watt smile.

"You have practically increased your income one hundred bucks," she says. "It is a pleasure to work for anyone who is so witty. I hope you stay longer than the nice man who had this office before."

"If he has went away from here, he is lucky," I said gloomily.

"Oh, he did not think so," Gwen says. "We and he were all shocked when he was arrested."

That gets me under. "Arrested?"

"Hadn't you heard? Oh yes, he was arrested for plagiarism. Right in this very office, sitting where you sit now. Poor darling, he just couldn't think up a story and Platzie was pressing him, so he copied a story out of a magazine and sent it in as his own."

"The fool!" I manage weakly.

"They used to do that in Hollywood a long time ago," Gwen admits. "But Hollywood has changed."

"I am afraid so." I feel a little seasick.

Shortly afterwards I am slumped in a blue fog when a terrible smell hits me on the schnozzle. Gwen notices it, too.

"That has to be either fertilizer or a fumigation," she exclaims, closing the window.

But this terrible stench don't wait for doors or windows but fills the whole room and we are about to make a run for the street when the phone rings and it is Platzie.

"Are you happy, Ded-Belles?" he wants to know. "I am waiting for that outline because you should work swell now that I have got you a muskellunge."

A light dawns. I dash over to the window, and tied to a little tree in the patio is something with horns what looks like a sheep but is the size of an ox. Even this creature looks a little embarrassed at the smell he is raising.

"They could not get the muskellunge, or musk-ox, into your office," he is saying when I pick up the receiver again, "but I hope you can smell him nice from where you are because I had a lot of trouble getting you one with a nice odor."

"Lissen, Platzie, ol' pal, now lissen carefully!" I plead. "If this bull skunk ain't moved in about five minutes, I am through. Get it—through!"

Well, Gwen has some My Sin perfume which she pours on a handkerchief and makes me a mask of it. So we sit and wait, and by noon the smell has faded so it is safe to open the window again, although I feel sorry for the poor musk-ox who has to live with himself.

I am very put out because the mail comes without a letter from B-G, and I am getting panicky. I cannot understand it. Then a kid walks in and hands me a telegram.

The first thing I see is that it hails from North Bay, Canada. I sigh because I know all my troubles are now over. That is before I read this:

NO NEWS MUST BE GOOD NEWS STOP HUNG AROUND FOR  
THREE DAYS WAITING FOR LETTER FROM YOU STOP SINCE  
NONE ARRIVED ASSUME EVERYTHING FINE STOP AM LEAVING  
IMMEDIATELY FOR INTERIOR WILL BE OUT OF REACH FOR  
ABOUT MONTH STOP DEPENDING ON YOU SO DO NOT FAIL ME.

B-G.

"Good news?" Gwen chirps from her desk.

"Lissen, you!" I snarl. "I thought you mailed that letter I give you last week!"

"But I did, darling!" she says, surprised. "In fact, if you had not given it to me it would have come right back to you because, silly boy, you had addressed it to *Mr. Bel-Geddes*, which of course is yourself. But I caught the mistake and added the *s* making it *Mrs.* So do not worry, the letter will be forwarded to your dear wife, who, I see by the papers, is now in Paris."

Well, now I can see everything, such as why I have not heard from the boss, because the letter will go to Europe. And in the meantime, B-G has gone into the wilderness and I am holding the well-known burlap container. Well, I suppose a guy does in time get used to a cell.

Thus I am in a very low state indeed when a guy comes into my office wearing a uniform. Here it is already, I think.

"I will come peaceably," I tell him wearily.

He grins and hands me two envelopes. "Congratulations, toots," he says. "You have won the hundred potatoes with your title *Merchant of Menace*. And also here is your paycheck. By the way, Platzbaum says why in hell ain't you sent in your outline?"

Nonplussed, I fail to argue. In one envelope sure enough is a check for a hundred bucks and in the other is a check for thirteen hundred and some. "Say, what is this?" I scream. "Do I have to pay myself the bonus? I am due for fifteen hundred carrots, and this is not yet fourteen."

Gwen comes in and puts her arm on my shoulder while she looks at the check. "Oh, that," she says, "is the deduction for your old-age pension after you reach sixty-five."

"That is robbery!" I swear. "I will never reach sixty-five at the rate I am going."

"Restrain yourself," Gwen tells me. "You must conserve your creative energy to get that outline in, because Platzie called again for it."

"Any outline they get from me will be written by somebody else," I growl. "I am sick and ill of this movie racket and will you have dinner with me tonight because it is Saturday, even here in Hollywood, and Monday will probably see me in jail. Furthermore, this hundred buck check is rightfully yours."

"But you are a married man!"

"Fah! Speaking frankly, Mrs. Bel-Geddes does not care a tinsmith's damn what I do."

"I am indeed sorry to hear that," Gwen says slowly. "Divorce?"

"She would divorce me like that!" I admit, snapping my fingers.

"You are a sportsman, anyhow," Gwen confesses. "So if you care to call for me at the Mark Twain Hotel where I reside, I shall be ready about six thirty to battle our way into Victor Hugo's for cocktails."

Well, our party is a huge success. After cocktails—the number of which I do not remember and wish to forget—there is a slight lapse of time to change the scene and I find myself sitting in a rent-and-drive-yourself roadster along the Malibu Beach with Gwen tangled up in my arms and a moon. Somehow I have a vague recollection of trying to convince her that I am really the guy the public thinks Robert Taylor is, or maybe it was Casanova.

On Sunday I begin to worry if along with making a fool of myself I have perhaps spilled the beans that I am not in fact Tristram Bel-Geddes, but none other than plain Jake Boggs, and will she tell Platzbaum, which would indeed hurry my trip to San Quentin.

So about three o'clock in the afternoon, I call the Mark Twain, and the clerk tells me Gwen is not in. I call at four, and he tells me she is out. By seven o'clock I do some serious worrying and call the manager. From him I find that she went out early with a typewriter to do some work. But he would neither tell me where she went or what was the work.

So I call the redheaded stewardess whose husband is on another trip, as I do not wish to be alone with myself tonight.

I feel lousy on Monday. I wish I did not have to show up at the studio, and I also wish that the brakeman had not gone out of town, or if so, he had not stayed out so long. A husband should stay home with his wife on Sunday night, especially when she is redheaded.

Too, I furthermore hate to go to the studio because I know that Platzie has set this day as deadline for my story and he will be primed to have me arrested, fired, or thrown out. So I stall around and do not reach the office until noon, and at that time I almost wish the musk-ox was there so I could be friendly with him on account of he is a social leper like I.

Gwen is at her desk looking offensively efficient for a Monday morning, and before I can hiccough a greeting, or otherwise, she lets me have it!

"Platzie has been wearing out the phone, darling. Better inhale a



bromo and stagger over." And the while she is mixing me a bromo which I must say, after the first jolt, steadies me.

Platzbaum is in a sweat when Miss Baby shoves me into his office. He peers at me, beats his Ubangi lips together, and charges across the room. Now, while I am all braced to be insulted, I am not expecting a physical attack, so I am practically nonplussed. But he only takes my hand and pumps it.

"You are a gem, Ded-Belles!" he shouts. "You are actually colossal, in a small way, of course. This outline you have sent in is terrificable! It is almost too good for a B production; it will make an A, and maybe if your treatment is as good as your outline, we shall make a Super-Colossal Special out of it with maybe Robert Montgomery or Clark Gable perhaps."

"Where do I take the treatment?" I manage. "I need one."

"Ha! Such wit, such wit!" he bleats, and bangs me between the shoulder blades while I am clawing for the door. "That scene of yours where the great lover has practically to beat off all the women who love him and wish to love him is terrificable! You are a pure, or maybe a semi-pure genius, Ded-Belles!"

Slowly I am growing rapidly numb. I have sent in no outline for no story. But a terrible truth is dawning.

"Lemme look at that outline," I say. "Maybe I misspelled a word."

Platzie shoves into my hand the outline and I look it over. The first page is neatly typed and headed "*Lover Don't Leave Me* by Tristram Bel-Geddes." From then on the story is composed of all the confidential stuff I have whispered to Gwen when I am romantic on Saturday night.

I am burning up, so I leave Platzie talking to himself and dash back to my office in the patio. Gwen is there, smiling.

"Lissen, you!" I shout. "You certainly pulled a contemptible, underhanded, lousy is the word, trick on me. You are the kind of a girl who kisses and tells! Because of a few drinks and a moon, I am fool enough to confide in you the intimate details of my private life. Not only was it bad enough to write it down, but you want to make a movie of it. Even perhaps a comedy! I and you, therefore, are washed up, through, and otherwise finished!"

"Now *you* listen!" Gwen says very quietly. "As you say, we are through because I do not like your style of not working. That is bad enough, but lack of gratitude is worse. You were supposed to have an outline in Platzbaum's office by today, and I spend all my Sunday whipping it into proper formula for you."

"Furthermore," she says, "when you took me to the Malibu Beach, I figured you must be dictating a story because I did not think you would take me for a fool enough to believe that hokey you told me. Another excellent reason for not believing it was that your technique of lovemaking does not come up to your oral admissions. So I remembered most of your line and submitted it verbatim like a loyal secretary. But since you do not appreciate it, we are through. Good day!" And she walks out.

I am plenty sore.

A week passes, and I am not mad any more. I try to get her the day after she leaves by calling the stenographic department, but they tell me she has been assigned to another writer and should they send me another girl. I tell 'em no, I do not wish another girl.

Every day Miss Baby calls and wants to know have I got some of the treatment ready to submit. I worm out of her that a treatment is really the whole story which they want in about sixty pages.

They change the title to *Lover Don't Stay Away Tonight*, instead of *Lover Don't Leave Me*, because they figure the Hays office will kill it if they put "*Love*" and "*Me*" together on account of it might look suggestive. And I am afraid if Gwen does not come back to me, I will never submit anything.

Then Platzbaum himself comes into my office and wants to know ain't I happy and why in hell ain't I done some work. I tell him that my secretary is working for another writer just when I am accustomed to having her around and I cannot work well without her. He promises to have her back in my office first thing in the morning.

Well, in the morning I come in, but no Gwen. Platzbaum tells me she has quit Super-Colossal and nobody knows where she lives because she has checked out of the Mark Twain without telling even the manager where she is going.

I am in an embarrassing quandary on account of who will write the treatment of *Sweetheart Be Back Tonight*. Platzie has changed the name again because he says "lover" is perhaps too strong a word.

The next day Platzbaum comes in with Peter Petere, who is the studio lawyer. They threaten they will break the contract and sue me for something or other. But I ask if it isn't true that I have six weeks in which to finish my work. Peter Petere admits what I say is true, but says it is customary for a writer to turn in the story as he writes it.

Well, I want time, so I say, "I am an uncustomary writer, I assure

you, gentlemen!" And I further explain that I have peculiar methods of work which are unlike anything the studio has ever seen. And Platzie says he hopes they are not as peculiar as the guy who had the office before me and was arrested.

About a month later I step into a small drugstore and there is Gwen perched over a cup of coffee.

I am so overcome I cannot for a minute speak, so I climb onto a stool beside her and just stare an eyeful.

She blushes a little and says, "Hello, darling, how's the story coming along?"

"Honest," I tell her, "it is difficult for me to speak on account of I am so glad to see you. Perhaps I should ask you how comes the story, because it was all your idea."

"Oh dear no, it was nothing of the kind," she insists. "After all, I am but a little stenographer and you are the genius and I only wrote down all the fascinating things you told me. It must be fun to be a writer."

I look close for signs of sarcasm, but she wears none. I know she cannot be working because of the time of day, so I manage:

"Gwen, there is a moon again tonight and if you would consider taking some more dictation from me at the beach, I will gladly pay you very well indeed."

"Well, that is a fine point of ethics," she smiles. "I of course get paid for straight secretarial work, but the last time you so mixed it up with matters that were not—er—strictly stenographic that I would not like to take money on account of it might affect my amateur standing."

She can see how disappointed I am, so she says softer: "However, darling, I will go to the Malibu with you in the moonlight and take your dictation on one stipulation—that since you are a married man, Mr. Bel-Geddes, I must ask that you confine your activities to dictation and do not attempt to act out every scene, as it were."

"I needed atmosphere," I say weakly.

"Well, those are my terms," Gwen says. "You can get your atmosphere from the moon if necessary, but I cannot concentrate on your dictation if I am all tangled up in your—er—arms."

"Agreed!" I promise. And now I know why they call it a treatment.

So we go to the Malibu and I try to tell Gwen I am crazy about her on account of I have known many girls, but none have what she has and I can never feel the same towards one of them again. And

only once does she ask me about my wife and will I please remember this is supposed to be a fiction story and I have promised not to maul her.

The next morning she says last night I have given her enough material not only to write a treatment but nearly all the dialogue for the story, which Platzie has renamed *I'll Love You Forever* on account of the "*Tonight*" seemed sort of temporary and "*Forever*" has more permanence which will help to sanctify marriage, which the Hays office thinks is swell.

Well, I phone Platzie and tell him I am having labor pains and will he not disturb me until I am finished. Then I sit on the plumber-built chair and read the newspaper while Gwen writes from the other room. I read what she writes, and my face gets red when I read what a big mouth I am. Gwen has a very careful memory, but I do not think I could have said all that much.

The story is finished at last, and I send it in to Platzbaum. Now that it is in, I no longer care to think about it or Platzie, and I should be relieved.

However, I am not at all relieved because Gwen has told me she has a swell job offered her out at Paramount. I am now in a serious quandary because I cannot tell her how much I love her and that I will love her indeed forever on account of she thinks I am married to Mrs. Bel-Geddes, which of course is a serious mistake for me or for anybody else, even including Bel-Geddes.

To make it worse, Mrs. Bel-Geddes comes out in a newspaper interview from Paris and spikes the rumors of a divorce saying she and her husband are terribly happy and she can hardly wait to get back in his arms again, which Gwen naturally thinks is mine.

I almost hope Platzie wants me to do the story over again.

I have decided to break down and tell Gwen the whole truth s'help me God, when Platzbaum and Peter Petere come into my office in the patio. I do not wish to see them, but Platzie says that *Forever We Love* (the new title) is not only stupendous, it is super-stupendous and they appreciate how I have not only given them a full treatment but have practically wrote perfect dialogue and it is almost a shooting script, which means that they will have an easy time writing the screenplay.

I say, "I am glad you like it. Good day."

"But," Petere continues, "we have decided to take up the option on your contract."

"Oh, no you don't!" I tell them. "Not for any price will I become a

mere hack writer and sully the good name of Tristram Bel-Geddes, which now stands for something superfine in literature, by doing pictures for what is known in intellectual circles as morons."

Well, Platzie cannot believe he has heard right, so I repeat, after which he starts raising the ante by hundreds until he is up to twenty-two hundred and fifty a week which is hard to refuse and I am panting on account of I do not believe there is that many potatoes in the world. Still, I cannot see going to the penitentiary for forgery on top of impersonation, so I remain honest.

Finally, however, Platzbaum has had enough, and he and Petere are about to leave when Gwen pipes up.

"Mr. Platzbaum, may I make a suggestion. I have a suspicion that the name Tristram Bel-Geddes is only a pseudonym anyhow, so perhaps if you offer him a contract under another name and promise not to connect the Bel-Geddes name with the studio so that it will not be affected in literary circles, he might reconsider, because it is only his genius you wish to engage and not his name."

While I remain speechless because of this, Platzie and Peter Petere put their knobs together in a huddle, and when they come out of it they say it is a super-colossal idea and they will make me a contract under any old name I say at twenty-two hundred and fifty potatoes a week for three years, and also they promise the name of Bel-Geddes will never be mentioned around the studio.

That nonplusses me somewhat, but I finally manage to say:

"Gentlemen, I might consider that if you will put it in the contract that Gwen here agrees to stay as my secretary on account of for some peculiar reason, I doubt if I can do my best work without her."

The attorney says he would gladly include that in the contract only it would not be binding on Gwen, so if I wish to retain her I should draw up a special contract between I and her, and he will draw one up for us.

After Platzie and Petere go out to draw up the contracts, I am embarrassed on account of I must have a showdown.

"Gwen," I say, "you know I guess that I am a fraud on account of you did all the writing and I did not do any of it."

"Well, darling, I know, but I could not write without you because in the first place I have had very little actual experience in love although I believe I could learn rapidly. The point is, however, that the studio would not give me a chance to write. They always hire big names, like yours. I have proved to myself, though, that I can write."

"You have also proved I cannot," I admit. "So I cannot sign any contract with the studio unless you agree to stay with me permanently at your own price."

"But, darling," she says, "permanent is for how long?"

"You yourself said it was forever," I remind her.

"Oh, that was for a screen story," Gwen laughs. "But are you by any chance proposing to me?"

Before I can figure that one out, the phone rings. It is Peter Petere who wants to know what name shall he make the contract out for.

"Boggs," I yell at him. "J-A-K-E B-O-G-G-S!"

"Okay," the lawyer agrees. "And I'm making out the contract for your secretary. How long a term is it for, and what's her last name?"

I cover the mouthpiece with one paw and look at Gwen.

"Well, toots," I tell her. "Make up your mind. It's Petere and he wants to know about your contract—how long's it for and under what name?"

She moves closer and smiles. "Tell him the name is Gwen Boggs," she whispers. "And make it forever."

After I hang up, I remind her: "Well, darling, we better fly over to Yuma this evening and make it legal, on account of you might get arrested for impersonation."

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**C**harlotte Jay wrote **Beat Not the Bones** (Soho, \$10.00pb) more than forty years ago, and it has now been reprinted. It's the story of Stella Warwick, an insecure and shy young Australian woman who travels alone to the small British settlement of Marapai on the wild island of New Guinea. She comes to learn why her husband, an older anthropologist in charge of protecting the natives, apparently committed suicide not long after he left her to stay behind for a time with her father while he returned to his post. Stella thinks the trip will be hard. No one expects her; indeed, none of his colleagues had known that Warwick was married. Stella has barely recovered from the shock of losing her father to a heart attack when she learns of David Warwick's death. Now she is possessed by one thought only: that her husband had no reason to die at his own hand. And if Stella is correct, she has put herself in the eye of a storm. Tightly written and haunting, heady with exotic atmosphere, and brutal in its look into the darkest side of the human heart, this is an unsentimental and very suspenseful tale. Readers who appreciate Ruth Rendell and Minette Walters should pick up this reprint.

Mysteries have become so popular that we're seeing a plethora of anthologies, several designed for special tastes. One from Carroll & Graf that is definitely worth a look is **The Mammoth Book of Historical Detectives** edited by Mike Ashley (\$9.95pb). It serves up tales by such well-known mystery writers as Ellis Peters and P. C. Doherty, as well as by newcomers like Kate Sedley and Margaret Frazer. History, mystery, and bibliophilia, together in one volume, is an irresistible recipe, and at over five hundred pages, it should satisfy the heartiest appetites.



Anne Perry continues her outstanding Inspector William Monk series with **Cain His Brother** (Fawcett Columbine, \$22.95). Like her series featuring Thomas and Charlotte Pitt, the Monk books are set in Victorian London, and like the other series, Perry takes an unsentimental look at the age. Monk, a former Scotland Yard inspector, is barely making ends meet as a private consulting agent when he's sought out by an attractive client. Mrs. Genevieve Stonefield asks Monk to locate her missing husband, Angus. When last seen, this respectable young businessman and devoted husband and father of two small children was on his way to see his black-sheep twin brother, Caleb. In the past he has returned from these visits to the seedier sections of London bruised and careworn—but he has always returned. Look for the return here of the estimable nurse Hester Latterly, as well as Monk's sprightly and wise sponsor, Lady Callandra Daviot, and his friendly rival, lawyer Oliver Rathbone. They will quickly become a welcome circle of old friends for you, as they have for me.

Barbara Neely's amateur sleuth, black domestic worker Blanche White, returns in an impressive and thought-provoking novel titled **Blanche Among the Talented Ten** (Penguin, \$5.95). The title is a reference to W. E. B. Du Bois's thesis that the "Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men." And here is Blanche, a sharp and warm no-nonsense woman of middling years, who has been sending her adopted niece and nephew to a snooty private school and finding herself increasingly anxious about the unsympathetic and elitist attitudes the kids are expressing. Even so, she can't deny them a vacation visit with two friends at an exclusive all-black coastal Maine resort. The plan is for Blanche to join them, treat herself to a stay at the posh inn for several days, and then babysit all the kids while the other couple take a second-honeymoon sailing jaunt. But a killer has other plans for everyone at Amber Cove. Neely has created some marvelous characters here, especially an older feminist artist and a young woman as confidantes, and she bravely explores the issue of prejudice within the black community as Blanche sets out to unmask a killer.

For something different, pick up Robert Cullen's **Cover Story** (Ivy, \$5.99), a thriller set in today's Russia. Colin Burke is the Moscow correspondent for a prestigious American weekly magazine, and in many ways he fits the prototype. He's a loner who drinks too much, resents his desk-jockey editor back home, and occasionally trusts the wrong women. But he's been in Moscow a long

time; he's seen it all, he knows his way around. That is until a beautiful Israeli woman convinces him that he may be hot on the trail of the story of his life—if he can live long enough to tell it. This novel has the memorable characters, authentic feel to the landscape, and increasing feeling of paranoia one expects from an espionage thriller.

Carole Berry's tap dancing temp, Bonnie Indermill, is back and in top form in **The Death of a Difficult Woman** (Berkley, \$4.99). As usual, our Bonnie has reported for a new assignment: assistant to the woman in charge of moving the corporate offices of a large legal firm from their old Manhattan building to their new one uptown. After one day, however, the understudy goes on: Bonnie's boss quits. Suddenly Bonnie may have a new career (relocation expert) at a much higher salary, with a handsome construction company head working on the project as an off-the-clock bonus. Problem is, the chaos of moving provides the ideal opportunity for a killer disguised as a colleague. The insider's peek at yet another one of Bonnie's places of employment—added to her irresistible droll voice—makes me hope that she continues to receive those pink slips in her paychecks.

British author Minette Walters has had three suspense novels published, and each one has been an award winner. Now there's a fourth, **The Dark Room** (Putnam, \$22.95), and fans will recognize the finely detailed characterization and surprising plot twists that marked her earlier books. Jinx Kingsley is a professional photographer and the daughter of a wealthy British tycoon whom the press has long dubbed ruthless. She wakes up in a posh private sanitarium, claiming to remember nothing of the recent past. She was thrown from her car right before it smashed into a pole and burned; the police are calling it attempted suicide. Apparently Jinx's fiancé and her best friend had chosen the week before Jinx's wedding to announce they were eloping together. Slowly a picture emerges of Jinx, her circle, her past; what isn't revealed, however, is how much she remembers—and how much she knows about several murders. The premise of *The Dark Room* isn't as fresh as Walters' earlier books, and be warned: it runs to three hundred and eighty pages, much of it dialogue. But the writing is splendid, and fans of P. D. James's psychological novels will undoubtedly relish the painstaking character delineations.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The November Mysterious Photo Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, go to Jan Streilein of Lansdale, Gansevoort, New York; Lesa Brock Bodenschatz of Copiague, Highland Heights, Kentucky; ry Baldwin of Calgary, Alberta, Kingston, New Jersey; and Lois Berning of Oceanside, California.

tograph contest was won by Michigan. Honorable mentions Pennsylvania; S. J. Moredock of Neace of Whitesburg, Kentucky; New York; Lorenia Moore of D. B. Hall of Minford, Ohio; Bar-Canada; Bernice F. Weiss of Liv-

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## GENTLEMAN GERALD MEETS HIS MATCH by Robert Kesling

Despite continued publicity surrounding the Ruby Crucifix, Mother Felicia continued to wear it openly around the cathedral. To the bishop, who expressed concern, she replied, "Our Lord will protect it."

The crucifix had been presented to her by her older brother Emile Ledoux, the noted explorer, when she took her first vows. In its back was embedded the faultless sixteen-carat ruby.

Gentleman Gerald, the Rhyming Robber, knew all about the fabulous gem. To himself he said:

*I'll have that ruby, that I swear;  
It's just a matter of when and where.*

Disguising himself as a nun (no problem for that great impersonator), Gerald presented himself to Mother Felicia as a novice. On his third day in the cathedral, he addressed her:

*"A miracle's been revealed to me;  
Join me tomorrow and you will see."*

She agreed and the following day accompanied him high up to the cathedral top. Always a gentleman, Gerald knelt and said:

*"Gimme that ruby and maintain silence;  
I'd rather not resort to violence."*

In answer, good Mother Felicia pulled a whistle from her robe and blew it. Gendarmes materialized from behind every pillar. As he was being handcuffed, Gentleman Gerald said:

*"Tell me, lady, if you can,  
What made you certain I'm a man?"*

Mother Felicia, herself a bit of a wit, answered:

*"One thing I noticed in the chapel  
Was your bobbing Adam's apple.  
Then I was sure, sir, 'twas quite simple:  
It made a ripple in your wimple."*

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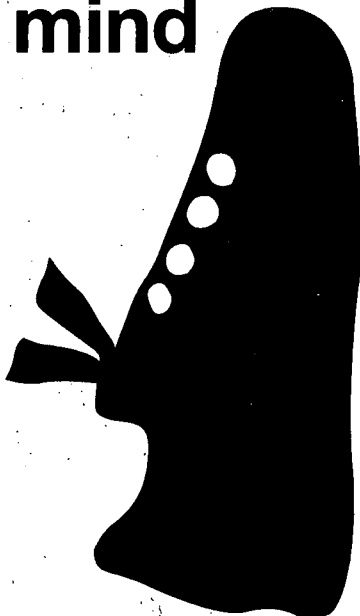
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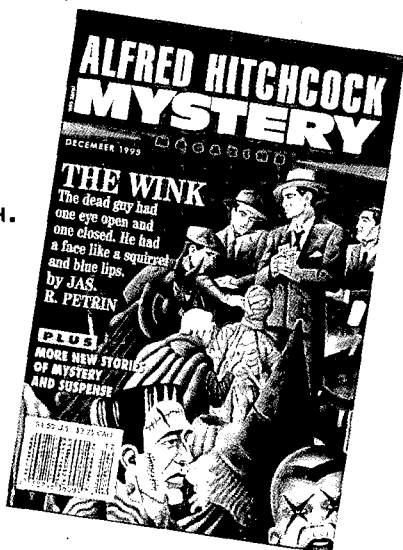
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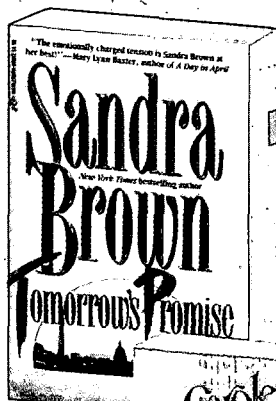
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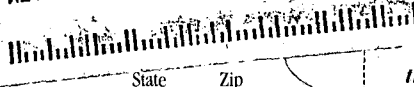
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